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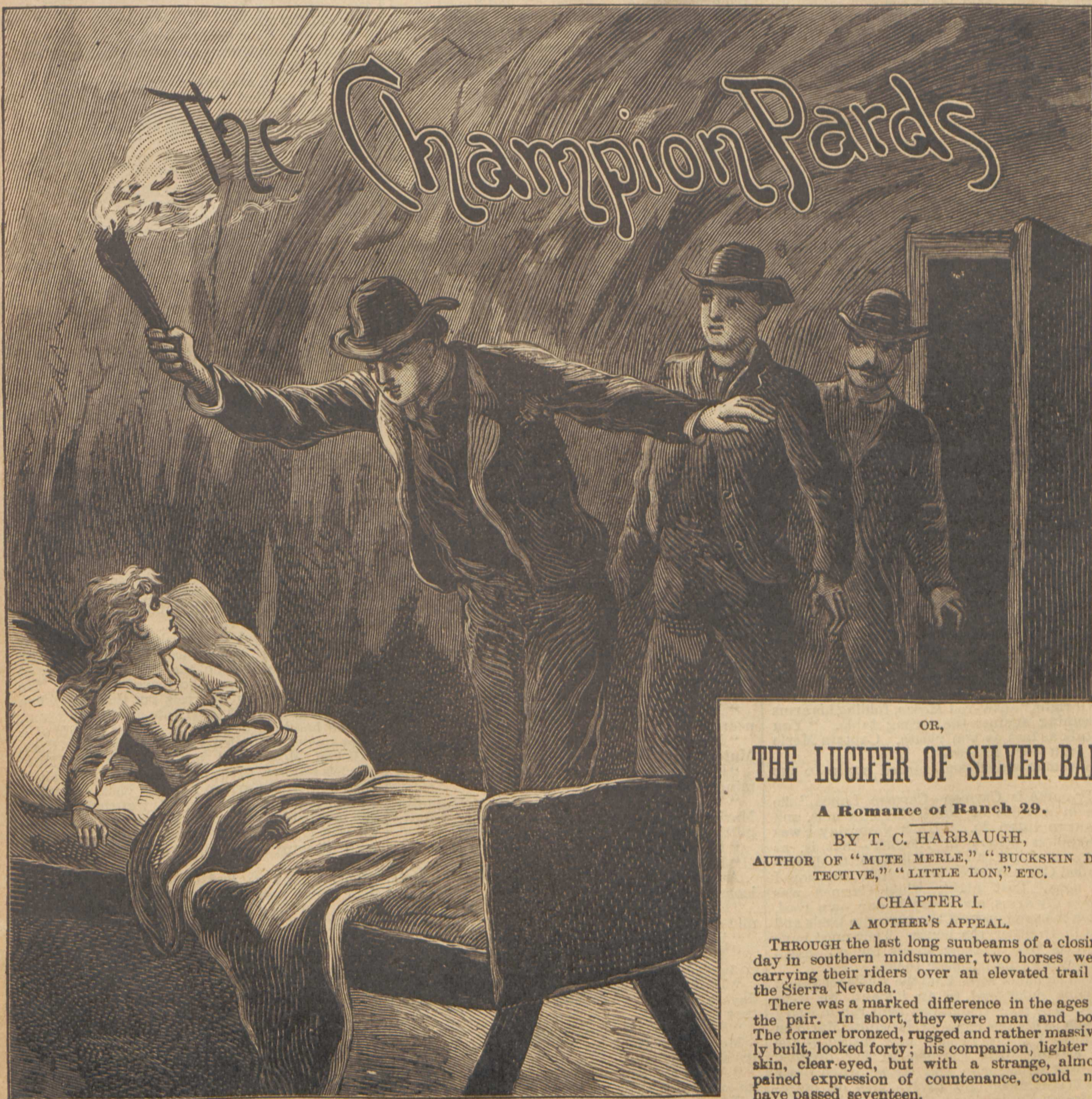
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IN A MOMENT SIERRA NOLL WAS HOLDING THE TORCH OVER THE FRIGHTENED FACE
OF A LITTLE GIRL!—THE LOST PEARL OF RANCH 29.

OR, THE LUCIFER OF SILVER BAR.

A Romance of Ranch 29.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "MUTE MERLE," "BUCKSKIN DE-
TECTIVE," "LITTLE LON," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MOTHER'S APPEAL.

THROUGH the last long sunbeams of a closing day in southern midsummer, two horses were carrying their riders over an elevated trail in the Sierra Nevada.

There was a marked difference in the ages of the pair. In short, they were man and boy. The former bronzed, rugged and rather massively built, looked forty; his companion, lighter of skin, clear-eyed, but with a strange, almost pained expression of countenance, could not have passed seventeen.

All at once the man drew rein and inclined his head toward that part of the mountain

which they had just covered. He had touched the boy in doing so, and both horses stood side by side in the trail.

"I am sure I heard a horse in Echo Gulch," remarked the man, turning as he spoke so that his comrade could see his face. "He was going at a good gait, too. I don't know who should follow us, Merle; but, any way, we will beat the rider to Cinnabar."

The youth, who had paid close attention to the movements of the speaker's lips, made no reply, and the horses started off again.

By and by they rode into a collection of buildings with rather well-defined streets between the rows, and the men whom they saw, with the lights and sounds that greeted them on every side, told that they were in a flourishing mining-town.

In front of a certain house the boy dropped the reins upon the neck of his steed and manipulated his fingers for a moment before his partner's eyes.

"All right, captain," replied the man as the dumb boy slipped from the saddle. "I'll be back in a jiffy," and away he went, the riderless horse following with a neigh of delight.

Five minutes later the burly figure of the man entered the house to find his little friend writing at a table.

"Here I am," said he as the boy looked up. "Nobody has come yet. The horse in Echo Gulch may not have been headed for Cinnabar but—"

He broke his own sentence by a quick spring to the door, and, for a moment, he stood there with one half of his body outside.

"I guess the horse is hyer," he muttered, but he continued to keep his place with his gaze directed at the plaza or square which they had lately crossed.

It was not long before the figures of a horse and his rider appeared between the occupant of the doorway and the light of a faro den in full blast and in another minute he was astonished to see a woman alight.

"Jehosaphat!" he exclaimed falling back into the house but not disturbing the boy writing at the table. "Hyers the most unexpected of visitors. Captain!" he leaned forward and touched the youth, who started up and immediately fixed his gaze upon his face.

"We've got a caller—the rider of the horse I heard in Echo Gulch."

By this time the person just seen on the outside had crossed the threshold and stood in the soft lamplight that pervaded the plainly furnished room.

She was a fine-looking woman, still young, and the possessor of a graceful figure and deep dark eyes which, as any one could see, now showed signs of mental anguish.

"Thank heaven! I have found you!" she broke forth, coming forward and halting in front of the boy who was studying her with puzzled curiosity.

"Don't you know? He can't hear you," said the man touching her arm at this juncture.

"I know that, but I know also that he can read a person's lips. I am speaking to Mute Merle, the young nabob of Cinnabar, and he knows what I'm saying, for you see that I stand in the light, and he is watching me like a hawk. You are his mine-boss, Mosco, are you not?"

"That's who I am," was the answer.

"Then, Mosco, I want you to hear my story as well as your master."

"All right," answered Mosco, folding his arms and leaning against the strong table. "You may talk as fast as you please. Captain Merle won't let a word get away."

The woman smiled and turned again to the boy.

"My name is Carmen—Carmen Lanca," she began in a voice of wonderful clearness, and pleasant to listen to. "Until yesterday I was the happiest person in Arizona—that is, as happy as a widow can be. I had a little daughter called Carmen after her mother, but now I have none. Last night, while Carmen was asleep in my arms, and beneath our own roof, a dozen men rode across the mesquite lands and halted in front of the house. They must have muffled the feet of their steeds for my sharp-eared servants did not hear them.

"At a signal of some kind the whole set raised a terrible shout, and, in an instant, we were awake. The poor frightened help ran in every direction with the name of Mesquite Marlo on their lips. I left my couch and rushed to the door, leaving little Carmen in her dreams. What was my surprise and terror when I saw in the bright moonlight twelve men on horseback drawn up in front of the porch? They wore broad-brimmed Mexicanish hats and

masks which effectually hid their faces. At once I felt that the servants had named the right person, for the tall man on the black stallion appeared to me as the dreaded Marlo whose lawless deeds have struck terror wherever he is known.

"I appealed to the band for mercy, telling its leader, to whom I turned, that we were not as wealthy as we were supposed to be. At this, several of the masks laughed derisively, but Mesquite Marlo silenced them with uplifted finger.

"All at once he cut my appeal short by saying in sharp tones:

"We don't want your money, Madame Lanca. We will not plunder your ranch to any great extent although your late husband did all he could against us. You will please produce your daughter, Carmen."

"A sudden giddiness almost overcome me," continued the narrator, growing pale at the recollection of the event she was describing. "I should have fallen in a swoon if Carmen's safety had not strengthened me against all such weakness. In a moment I was back at the door, and, with a cry of defiance, I shut it in the marauder's face. As I locked the portal I heard a heartless laugh, but, not waiting to see what the gang would do, I caught Carmen from her couch and fled. I had hoped to escape through the rear of the house to the grove and thence to a secret retreat which my husband had prepared in the mountains for an emergency. But, alas! I was not permitted to do so. The front door was burst in before I could quit the house. I heard the tramp of heavy feet and the rattle of spurs at my heels and, as Carmen was torn from my embrace I sunk to the floor like one dead."

Madam Lanca paused here and took up a glass of wine which Mosco had brought to the table at a sign from the deeply-interested youth.

Mute Merle and his companion noticed the almost immediate effects of the wine, and waited impatiently for the woman to continue.

"When I recovered I was in bed surrounded by frightened and weeping servants," she resumed. "They feared to tell me that little Carmen, the idol of the ranch, was gone; but I knew that she was not at my side, and that was enough. Carmelita, my maid, told me that Mesquite Marlo and his masked scoundrels had galloped off, taking the child with them. Then came another period of darkness and insensibility for me, but I soon came out of it as if Carmen's safety and a desire for vengeance had combined to bring me through. I said to myself: 'I will seek the best trailer in the Southwest. He shall find my Carmen and earn her mother's lasting gratitude. I will go to Mute Merle, who found the lost child of one Old Mont-criff. He will listen to me. He will say to me: I will find little Carmen and restore her to your bosom.' That is why I have ridden for more than a long day toward Cinnabar, Captain Merle. I offer all the reward I can for my child—every acre of Ranch 29, and the gratitude of Carmen Lanca. The little one is in the hands of Mesquite Marlo. My husband once led a lot of enraged men against him. They killed several of his followers. Now to strike the dead he turns upon me. He deal the most cruel blow a mother can receive; he robs her of her child. Why didn't he take my life and leave the innocent one to the servants?"

A swift glance passed between man and boy.

"Madame," said Mosco, "was there no help nearer?"

"None whom I would trust as I can trust Mute Merle," was the quick response.

"Captain Merle has his hands full here. His mines keep him busy—"

"Yes, yes; but think of my child in Mesquite Marlo's clutches!" interrupted Madame Lanca, putting forward her hands appealingly.

"How old is little Carmen?" queried Mosco.

"Four."

At this moment Mute Merle sprang up and looked at Mosco.

The next instant his fingers moved rapidly in mid-air.

"What does he say?" cried the woman.

"To-morrow is general settlement day," Mosco replied to the boy mine-owner.

"That is true, Mosco," answered the flying fingers. "You can remain behind and attend to that for me."

"But you won't go alone, captain?"

Mute Merle shook his head and went back to the sign language.

"All right," exclaimed Mosco, using his favorite expression as he backed toward the door. "I will have Captain Poncho here in less than five minutes."

"What does he say? Is he going to become my champion? Don't kill me with suspense," cried Madame Carmen, seizing hold of Mosco's sleeve.

"Yes, madame. Mute Merle will find little Carmen or die in the attempt!" exclaimed Mosco as he vanished.

The Widow Lanca sent a joyous cry toward Heaven.

"I knew he would not fail me!" she said from the depths of her heart.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE TRAIL.

It is two weeks later and the air of the Arizona desert is as hot as a furnace.

The closing of the long, dry midsummer day affords but little relief to man and beast. Here and there clumps of parched cacti throw faint shadows as the prickly stalks catch the last beams of the ball of fire about to disappear below the horizon.

In all this cheerless, monotonous landscape nothing appears to relieve the eye that roves over it.

Nothing? In the hazy northwest, where the keenest observer may detect the faint blue outlines of a distant range of peaks, rise and fall two objects as they come forward toward the heart of the plain.

They near a particular batch of mesquite and cacti and resolve themselves into two horses and their riders.

Though both are rather small in stature, the eldest the smaller, they sit their steeds like experienced horsemen, and when they reach the desert plants they drop rein and let the horses rest.

"Mesquite Marlo is not under one's hand when he is wanted, eh, Merle?" asked the elder of the pair whose name was Captain Poncho.

Mute Merle smiled and shook his head.

"But, you don't want to go back, captain?" quickly queried the boy with his fingers.

"With our mission just under way? By Jupiter, no! I enlisted for the war—for the war, Merle," he repeated with emphasis. "Madame Lanca's story made my blood boil as it did yours. No; I don't want to go back. Such a thought hasn't entered my head since I set out."

Mute Merle gave his comrade a look of pride. He well knew the courage of the man who had set out with him from Cinnabar to find Carmen Lanca's lost child, and, if possible, to show the Masked Marauder that he could not carry on his depredations with impunity.

Captain Poncho, dwarfish in figure but with the agility of a cat and the keenness of a hawk in vision, was, next to Merle, the richest citizen of Cinnabar. Certain events of the past, events with which we are not dealing now, had brought the two men together as friends, and, although each was independent of the other, Captain Poncho was quite ready to act with the young nabob in anything he proposed.

Aside from this, Madame Lanca was young and exceedingly beautiful, and perhaps the little captain may have thought—well, no matter what at this time, reader.

Always careful of his dress, always with polished boots and mustache brushed and waxed just so, Poncho, the Bonanza Pigmy of Cinnabar, was a man who feared nothing. He had been given to quarrels but that was when he had a giant rival to irritate and perplex him, but he had settled down to the quiet life of a mine-owner with plenty flowing into his coffers.

When Mosco had brought him, by Mute Merle's request, to the latter's cabin on the night that witnessed Carmen Lanca's visit, and when he had heard in part the story of the swoop of the masked vultures upon Ranch 29 and the abduction of the child, he turned to the boy Croesus with flashing eyes and volunteered for the rescue.

This is why we find the two together resting their horses beside the cacti, with the sun taking a farewell look at them ere he bids the world good-night.

The avengers had accompanied Madam Lanca home. They wanted to take the trail from the very spot where the outrage had been committed.

For two weeks they had been abroad in mountain and upon the barren plains.

Mesquite Marlo was one of those rascals who leave few trails behind. Though well known by sight, he had never been paid back for any of his misdeeds. His band of marauders were never followed far. At certain places the trail would end and the keenest hunters had to acknowledge themselves beaten.

Marlo was a mystery. No one knew where he dwelt, or from whence he came.

The Arizona ranch within a certain scope of country that escaped a visit from him for a whole year was considered specially protected by some good genius. He and his masked minions were liable to fall upon it at the dead of night and before the residents could recover from their fright he had struck his blow and vanished.

It was not always plunder only. Sometimes the masked vulture killed.

"Let us go on," said Mute Merle's agile fingers when he and Captain Poncho had rested their horses. "We can't be far from Silver Bar. It will not do us any injury to rest there a day or so. You know what the herder of Big Boss Ranch told us?"

"Certainly I do," answered Poncho, who always squarely faced the silent speaker when he spoke. "But, I am not so sure that the herder told the truth."

"He only said that he suspected so and so, captain."

"I believe that was the way of it; but I don't think that Mesquite Marlo frequents Silver Bar any more than I do that he walks the streets of Cinnabar. I know these herders, Captain Merle. They like to hear themselves talk, especially when they get a chance to air themselves. Well, off we are for Silver Bar. Straight ahead, isn't it?"

Merle nodded, and the horses, refreshed by their needed rest, moved off almost as fresh as when they set out on the long journey two weeks before.

The brief twilight of the plains gave place to night. Myriads of stars came out in the blue arch above the two trailers, but they kept on as if the track to be pursued was a well-defined road.

By and by the scenery of their surroundings changed. They left the plain by degrees, and, after riding through some low timber scattered over a group of foot-hills, they came almost suddenly upon the lights of a town.

Mute Merle looked from right to left and back again as he rode down the narrow and crooked main street of Silver Bar. The heat, which had not decreased to any appreciable degree since sundown, had opened every door in the settlement, and beyond many the two champions saw the busy card-tables and the well-lined counters of the border dens.

They had reached the heart of the mining capital when Captain Poncho hailed a man who had just been thrown headlong out of a faro-room, and so well thrown that he had picked himself up from beneath the very feet of the two steeds.

"Where's your hotel?" questioned the captain.

The tough citizen stared at the two friends for a moment as if they had risen from the ground he had just struck; then, pointing diagonally across the street, he designated a rather pretentious frame building with the veranda peculiar to "hotels" in that locality.

"That's the 'Cute Catamount,'" said he, "and about fifty yards further down you'll find the 'Busted Fairy.' If you stop at one the friends of the other'll make life miserable for you. It's six of Desert Dan and half a dozen of Cinnamon Cuff. I don't take sides, gentlemen. Go ahead and discover for yourselves. I'm going back to git even with the alligator who pitched me into the street."

Mute Merle had understood all the man said, and when the tough walked away he pointed toward the hotel with the porch.

Three minutes later the champions of Carmen Lanca found themselves under the roof of the Cute Catamount. Their horses had been stabled and the landlord of the establishment, a very large man, with a horrid scar across one cheek, had given orders in a loud voice for an immediate supper.

When Desert Dan's back was turned, for a moment, Captain Poncho, with a swift glance at him, leaned toward Mute Merle and appeared to talk, though he did not say an audible word.

The Boy Nabob returned a nod and a smile, then his fingers moved rapidly for a second.

The next moment a fine-looking man, with a smooth face and beaming black eye, strode into the so-called reception-room. He was a person who would have attracted attention anywhere.

He bowed to Captain Poncho and Mute Merle, and waved his hand in a cavalier-like manner toward Desert Dan.

"How is it to-night, doctor?" obsequiously asked the fluffy landlord.

"All right, Daniel," was the reply. "The world still moves, and we're on the outside, eh, old fellow?"

"Bet we ar!" ejaculated Dan, with a grin, as though the man called doctor had perpetrated something intensely original.

The doctor laughed too, then with a look at the two trailers, he walked out and vanished.

"That's Doctor Doubleface," said the landlord over his counter to Merle and the little captain. "Knows more, owns more, and has more friends than anybody in these diggings. You don't catch him asleep. He's a weasel that don't shut his eyes. If you've come to buy the doctor out, it'll take a pile, gentlemen!"

Supper is announced, and Carmen Lanca's champions followed Desert Dan into the primitive dining-room.

In the midst of his repast, Captain Poncho happened to glance at the window on his right, and saw, close to the pane—saw it for a moment only—the smooth, clean-cut profile of Dr. Doubleface!

CHAPTER III.

THE CRAWL ACROSS THE ROOF.

"DOCTOR and spy, I see!" mentally exclaimed Poncho, not showing in the least degree the sudden discovery he had made.

Mute Merle had seen nothing of the apparition at the window, and the two friends finished their supper without any communication between them.

Once afterward Captain Poncho glanced toward the window, but the sinister face of the dark doctor had evidently been withdrawn for good. At least it was no longer there.

It had been agreed between the two trailers that their errand should be kept as secret as possible.

They were to discover the whereabouts of little Carmen Lanca without publicity, though they felt that some time or other they would come in contact with the dread Mesquite Marlo of the plains.

As Mute Merle was a character well known over a wide extent of territory, the two thought best to keep him in the background during their stay at Silver Bar, therefore, after supper, the Boy Nabob repaired to their room over the porch, while Captain Poncho, not so well known, and with a shrewd, secretive tongue in his head, returned to the office.

The captain may have desired to see more of Dr. Doubleface, whose actions had already given an emphasis to his name.

When he reached the office of the "Cute Catamount," which was also the bar-room, he found several men there.

The entrance of a stranger was apt to provoke some curiosity, and in an instant Captain Poncho found himself a target for numerous eyes.

He was looked over from head to foot, and was sure that his waxed mustache and polished boots had been speculated upon.

Knowing the custom of all border towns, he invited the crowd up to the bar, and thus broke the ice in a very clever manner.

He said that he and his companion were on a prospecting tour which might take them to the southwestern borders of Arizona.

Yes, he knew where Cinnabar was, had some business interests there, but if he could find anything that suited him better, he would invest and locate.

"Your young pard don't say much, does he?" suddenly asked the man behind the counter.

"Not much when he's tired and a little out o' sorts," responded Captain Poncho.

"What did you say his name was?"

Now, the captain had said nothing about Mute Merle's name, and he looked upon the question as an attempt to draw him out for a purpose of some kind.

"His name, did you say?" he asked.

"Yes. What did you say it was?"

"Belden—Belden Bayne, if you want all of it," and Captain Poncho did not show the least signs of choking on the falsehood.

"That's what you told me. I recollect it now," replied Desert Dan.

"You burly liar," thought the captain, "you never heard the name before, for it just popped into my head. If I'm not mistaken there's something in the wind here, and I think I see a thread of connection between the barkeeper and the doctor."

For the next twenty minutes a general discussion of mines, territory shafts, leads and such things engrossed the conversation in the bar-room, and then, with a final treat, Captain Poncho bade the party good-night and went up the narrow stairway to the little room where Mute Merle awaited him.

He found the young trailer seated on the edge

of the hard bed with eyes wide open and an expression of anxiety on his handsome face.

A flood of moonlight such as is shed from the clear summer skies of the Southwest streamed in at the window and silvered everything it touched.

There was no need of artificial light, and Captain Poncho drew a three-legged stool close to Merle and seated himself with his lips in the moonshine.

"What have you discovered?—anything?" queried the boy's fingers.

"Not much," answered the captain. "We've struck a hard, suspicious crowd."

"In what way suspicious?"

"They don't like strangers."

"Did they wonder at my absence?"

"No."

"Nor inquire after me?"

"Oh, yes. The whisky Ajax behind the bar asked a question or two on that point."

"Desert Dan, eh?"

"Yes."

Mute Merle put up his hand and slowly drew it across his forehead.

"I've located that man," resumed his talking fingers.

"The deuce you have!" exclaimed Captain Poncho.

"Do you recollect the big man who was whipped in Cinnabar several years ago?"

"For theft?"

The boy nodded with a smile on his face.

"Why shouldn't I? I was the chief officer of the court that tried him, and you, boy—"

"Yes, I was the main witness for the prosecution."

"Well?"

"Desert Dan is the culprit. Bring him before your mind, captain, as he looked then and as he looks now. Of course he has received the lurid scar since, but—"

"I see him now!" broke in the captain.

"That is why he played the clever little game over your name. I called you Belden Bayne, and we'll stick to the name. Your eye is better than mine to-night, boy. We have ridden into a nest of queer birds, and after all I shall not be surprised if we strike the trail of Carmen, right here."

A few moments longer the two talked in the moonlight, discussing the present and laying plans for the future, then Mute Merle, who was tired and felt the need of rest, stretched out on the pallet and dropped off into a deep slumber.

It was a slumber that was not broken for some time, and when the boy trailer awoke, he found his eyes wide open and the moonlight about to desert the room.

His first glance was toward the cot which Captain Poncho was to have taken. It was half in shadow, and he bent forward to make out the figure he expected to find there.

But it was empty!

In a moment Merle was on his feet.

He sprang across the little space that lay between the two beds, and saw that the captain's had been occupied. It was but a stride from the empty bed to the door, and the young champion took it to find the rude iron bolt in its place.

Captain Poncho had departed by the window, which looked out upon the sloping roof of the porch.

Mute Merle was soon at the sill.

Outside everything was strangely quiet for a wild town like Silver Bar. A faro ranch, whose front door was open when he retired, was closed now, and though he could not hear, the very aspect without—the calm light of the stars and the deserted streets—spoke loudly of peace.

Somehow or other, the youth lingered at the window, which was open and admitted the delightful air of the summer night.

He wondered what had become of his pard. Upon what sort of spying expedition had he embarked? Was he keeping track of Desert Dan, or had he gone to the tables for a tilt with fortune and the hazard of a few dollars?

All at once something rose above the eave of the porch at the end of the building.

Mute Merle saw it the moment it appeared, and from the first it held his eye.

It had the movements of a cat as it scrambled for a place on the roof. The young nabob drew back from the window as the object began to crawl across the roof toward him. He had discovered that it was human, and, stranger still, had seen that the crawler belonged to the gentle sex.

For some time Mute Merle lost sight of the crawler, who seemed to be hugging the weatherboarding of the house, which in some places was in shadow.

He could wait, for he had no doubt that his window was the goal of the person on the roof. At length the last ray of moonlight on the sill was blotted out.

The inmate of the room, hugging the shadows there, saw the head and shoulders of a young girl. They came timidly into view, and then a hand, grasping something white, slid across the sill.

Then followed a moment of breathless suspense, when, all at once, a bit of folded paper fell upon Mute Merle's bed, and head and hand vanished.

For some time the boy did not stir. When he moved he looked out upon the roof, in time to see the crawler drop cat-like to the ground, and to lose sight of her altogether.

Then the paper was snatched from the spot where it had fallen, and with eyes snapping with curiosity, Mute Merle knelt in the darkest corner of the room and struck a light.

It did not take him long to unfold the note; it seemed to open of its own accord, and he read these startling lines:

"STRANGE BOY:—For Heaven's sake fly, the moment you read these lines. You have entered a trap which has already closed upon your companion. He is in the toils. Stay not to save one already doomed, but go!—go!"

There was no signature to the warning, and, as Merle finished the reading, his match went out.

CHAPTER IV.

BETWEEN TWO SHUTTERS.

MUTE MERLE stood for a moment in the dark corner, with the warning in his hand.

He thought of two persons at one time, not of himself. What had become of Captain Poncho, and who had delivered the message he had just received?

Hiding the paper in his bosom, and resolved that no matter what happened, it should not compromise the writer, the Boy Champion returned to the window.

The town beyond, or as much of it as he could see, had the same quiet aspect already observed.

The roof of the porch was now clear, and while the young mine magnate looked, he wondered if the warning hand had been seen.

After awhile he looked to the two revolvers in his belt, and then crept over the sill.

Merle wanted to ascertain two important bits of information—the whereabouts of Captain Poncho and the identity of the warning bearer.

He had a friend in camp, but, what was that friend's name?—who was she?

The dumb trailer glided over the sloping roof toward the spot where the unknown girl had appeared and vanished. He found the space cast in shadow, and lowering himself, dropped to the ground below like a cat.

Captain Poncho had told him nothing about the episode in the supper-room. The face of Dr. Doubleface at the window was a secret which, from some unknown reason, the little bonanza king had kept to himself; but, for all this, Merle went down over the roof with the dark-faced doctor occupying a very prominent place in his thoughts.

The man had singularly impressed him from the first, and his manners, coupled with Desert Dan's estimate of him, had told him that Dr. Doubleface was a crafty, avaricious and dangerous man—a Satan in disguise.

Had Poncho fallen into the enemy's power while playing spy in Silver Bar?

It was not unlikely, for the captain was anxious to find little Carmen's trail, and he had probably left the hotel to pick up some information concerning the masked bandit.

Merle found the street in front of the Cute Catamount entirely deserted. The hotel itself seemed closed for the night—an odd occurrence for a wild border town. A dim light burned in the bar-room beyond the porch, but it did not reveal the figure of Desert Dan, proprietor and bartender, behind the counter.

The boy stole off across the street, where the shadows of the houses commingled and made one shade.

He went on toward the center of Silver Bar, keeping away from the lights which showed him where the gamblers were "fighting the tiger" over plain, rough boards.

At length he found himself in front of a building that stood apart from its neighbors, as if its pride had affected isolation. He had not been told whose house it was, but, the moment he saw it standing, dark and, in comparison, huge against the stars, he associated it with Dr. Doubleface.

Merle drew near to this building. He saw

that it had shutters lined with iron, for one which stood open reflected glitteringly here and there the light of the stars.

While he looked a light flashed for a moment beyond one of the windows; then all was dark again.

The boy seemed to leap forward at sight of the momentary beam.

He crouched along the ground and approached the house. The window in which he had seen the light was before him. The ironed shutters had a long straight crack between them, and in a moment, Merle had drawn himself above the sill and his eager eye was at the meager opening.

All was dark beyond, as if the light had been extinguished, but, in a minute, he was nearly blinded by a bright glare.

He now saw in the lofty room beyond his perch the tall and faultless figure of the man uppermost in his mind—Dr. Doubleface.

The citizen of Silver Bar was entirely alone.

Merle saw him take two tiny goblets from a shelf and place them on a table. He stood them so close together that their delicate rims touched.

Having done this, the doctor's next move was to take a physician's pocket case from his bosom. Opening this he drew out two slender vials, well corked. The contents of one were red and seemed to dance from side to side in their glass prison. The other vial held a sluggish liquid of a greenish hue.

A sinister smile lurked about Dr. Doubleface's mouth while he poured a few drops of the lively liquor into one of the goblets, then he covered them with some of the green chemical.

In an instant the union produced a strange ferment, the contents of the glass bubbled and leaped to the very top, but suddenly they settled down and the dark doctor filled the empty goblet with water.

Merle watched these mysterious proceedings with a deep interest; he seemed to forget his mission in breathless study of them.

He saw the doctor empty the united chemicals upon the water in the second glass where they spread out, writhing and twisting like a wounded octopus.

All at once a dark hand gathered up the floating liquid when it had been transferred to a clean glass, while Merle saw that it was perfectly colorless!

"That is the way Doctor Doubleface makes his poison!" flashed across the boy's mind.

The next minute he saw the door behind the doctor open slowly and a young girl looked into the room.

Merle almost dropped from his perch at sight of her, and the face and hand at the window above the hotel roof came back to him!

For a second the face—it was beautiful in shape and feature but strangely white—remained at the door when its owner came in and advanced to the table.

Dr. Doubleface looked at the young creature with his deep-set black eyes and Merle thought she trembled.

He continued to eye her until the hand which she had rested on the edge of the table fell off by degrees and finally disappeared.

"He has spelled the girl!" thought the dumb champion, as he watched the apparently lifeless figure in the chair.

Dr. Doubleface stepped back and looked at his work, then he darted forward and opened the vial into which he had dropped the results of his experiments.

Leaning over the girl he touched the vial to her lips and held it there for a moment.

Mute Merle felt a cold sweat come out on his forehead.

"He has killed her!" said his thoughts again. "In the name of Heaven what sort of villain is the dark doctor of Silver Bar?"

Suddenly he straightened on his narrow and insecure perch and toppled backward. If he had not been a mute a quick and startling cry would have passed his lips.

As it was he thrust one of his hands between the shutters, when, horrors! it opened wide, and for a moment left him clinging to it in the full light of Dr. Doubleface's lamp!

The reader may imagine how quickly the startled boy sought to free himself from his perilous situation.

He fell to the ground without the least show of ceremony, and alighted on his feet which was better than he expected.

The shutter was open but the window was dark!

For a second Mute Merle stood where he had alighted; then, with another look at the mysterious house, he wheeled and fled!

It did not take him long to reach the shadows of the cabins, and among them he stopped and collected his scattered thoughts.

He wondered whether Dr. Doubleface had seen him on the sill.

If he had, that settled his fate, in a measure, for he had already guessed that the tenant of the iron-shuttered house was master in Silver Bar.

He could go back to the hotel; he could creep along the roof to his room, but what would such action avail him if the doctor had discovered him?

The mute moved on again after a short mental debate of the important question: "What shall I do?"

He had not proceeded ten steps when his arm was seized, and he found himself face to face with a youth of his own age.

"It is death to stand here!" exclaimed the strange boy, though Merle heard no voice. "Come to my shanty. I may be marked and persecuted for helping you, but what of that?"

Mute Merle was whisked into a cabin close by, and the door was shut. A light was turned on, and his unknown friend leaned toward him in its beams.

"I know you now," said he, Merle watching his lips. "There is none other just like you in Arizona. You are Mute Merle of Cinnabar. I am Sierra Noll, the boy pest of Doctor Doubleface. Your friend is in the death-trap—caught by the man you wanted to find—Mesquite Marlo, the Masked Marauder."

Merle fell back with a stare.

CHAPTER V.

THE DOCTOR'S WEB.

THIS startling announcement, conveyed to the Boy Champion by the lips of his new acquaintance, for a few seconds drove everything else from his mind.

"I thought I would astonish you," proceeded Sierra Noll with a smile, by the time Merle had to a certain degree recovered. "I know the dark doctor like a book."

Merle, who knew that the youth could not understand the swift language of the fingers, drew a small tablet from his pocket.

For a moment his pencil moved over it and Sierra Noll saw him write:

"Don't deceive me. Be sure of such revelations before you make them."

"I am sure," was the reply. "Doctor Doubleface and Mesquite Marlo are one. I can prove this."

"Then," wrote Merle, "you ought to know something about his raids."

"Not much do I know. What he does when he is on the war-path I cannot tell, for I remain here."

"All the time?"

"Not quite," smiled the youth. "But, from whom were you flying when I stopped you?"

"From Doctor Doubleface."

"Had you been playing spy?"

"I had been watching him."

"In his house?"

Merle smiled.

Sierra Noll came closer, and his eyes lit up with an anxious, eager look.

"Was the bandit doctor alone?" he asked.

"No," answered the Mute's pencil. "A young girl was with him and I thought he killed her."

The doctor's pest, as he called himself, returned a light laugh, which puzzled the youth who watched him.

"The girl whom you saw was Zoe—Zoe of the Web, we sometimes call her," rejoined Sierra Noll. "She was not killed, as you thought. By this time no doubt she is wondering whether you intend to carry out the warning she delivered."

It was clear to Mute Merle now. He knew who had crawled across the roof of the Cute Catamount's porch and carried to him the mysterious message.

"If she is Doctor Doubleface's protegee, why should she warn me?" he wrote.

"She is in the web, I tell you. She is in it while I am on the outside. The robber doctor has never been able to bring me under the influence of his evil eye and his subtle arts. Did you ever see a serpent charm an innocent, harmless bird? No? Then you can't realize how this man with two lives handles Zoe of the Web. A certain power draws her to him whenever he comes back to Silver Bar after a raid. He came back last night."

Last night! Mute Merle wondered if he had not been away to exact ransom from Carmen Lanca for the return of her child.

"Mesquite Marlo is merciless when aroused," continued Noll. "I have seen many examples of his spirit here at Silver Bar. Why does he

pursue the profession of bandit when he could settle down surrounded by riches? No one knows. I have watched him like a hawk these five years, but I have never solved the riddle. He brings none of his spoil back with him."

"None at all? No prisoners, either?" asked the young nabob, his thoughts reverting to the lost child.

"I never saw one of his captives if he takes any."

"But," wrote Merle, "but you said at the outset that my companion, Captain Poncho, has fallen into a trap."

"Yes, a death-trap. I said that, too, didn't I?"

Merle was obliged to confess this with a bow.

"That is why I drew you in here," said the doctor's foil. "One person in the death-trap is enough."

"Where is the trap, and how did they catch Captain Poncho?"

For a moment there was no reply. Sierra Noll opened the door and looked out.

When he came back he lowered the light and leaned forward until his lips almost touched the young champion's face.

"If you were seen on the watch by Doctor Doubleface, you are not safe here," said he. "You don't want to quit Silver Bar with Captain Poncho in Mesquite Marlo's trap?"

The dumb pard shook his head with emphasis.

"Come, then. I'll show you one of the strangest places in existence. It could spring from the brain of no person but Doctor Doubleface. We will try to avoid the sleepless keeper of the prison, though he is night-eyed and as sharp as a fox. I wish to Heaven you had remained at Cinnabar, Merle, but since you are here I intend to befriend you. I am Doctor Doubleface's pest, ha, ha. He never could get me into the web, though Zoe is there, poor fly!"

The two youths left the cabin with the hand of Sierra Noll at Merle's wrist. The widow's champion looked toward the doctor's house but saw no signs of the mysterious man he had surprised at some strange work.

He could no longer see his companion's lips, and communication between them was not to be had.

They passed in the rear of a number of cabins and at length left the straggling row behind.

Noll led the way to a dark, cavernous opening in the mountain-side, and, still holding to Merle's wrist, pushed boldly in.

At once the boy from Cinnabar knew that they had entered a mine.

For some distance the pair pushed on, going deeper and deeper into the darkness. Eyes were of no account there, for the keenest could not have seen their owner's hand when held against his face.

At last Noll struck a match and held it above his head. The little flame sent out a peculiar hue, which at first dazzled Merle's eyes, for it was unlike any light he had ever seen.

"One of Doctor Doubleface's matches!" explained Noll, as Merle looked at him with a question in his eyes. "He don't make them for sale, no, no, but I'm his pest, you know, and I have to keep up with him, or I would soon drop into the web."

By and by the mute saw that they stood at the edge of a shaft, and that a mine-ladder hanging along a perpendicular wall led down into the earth.

"We will go down," continued Noll, ere the match went out. "We are now on the outside of the prison."

"Captain Poncho's prison?" hastily scribbled Merle on the wall.

"We shall see," smiled the guide. "Let us go," and Noll swung himself fearlessly over the shaft, and was followed by his comrade.

The long swaying ladder seemed endless and full of danger.

Merle thought they would never reach the bottom, but at length they stood on solid ground and still in Cimmerian gloom.

Again Noll's hand found his companion's wrist, and several narrow corridors were safely threaded.

All at once Merle's conductor halted and then fell back.

The next moment he caught the Boy Nabob and pushed him against the wall. Merle understood, and hugged the stone while he held his breath.

What Noll heard he did not know, but he felt a fitting object of some kind brush him as it passed, to vanish toward the ladder in the darkness!

It was several minutes before the two boys started on again.

Unable to ask his friend a question, Mute Merle's brain was filled with exciting and perplexing thoughts.

Who had passed them in the darkness—Dr. Doubleface?

They emerged into a good-sized chamber, a short time after the adventure in the corridor. Merle put up his hands, but could feel nothing.

Noll took his hand and led him to a wall, which he found was almost as smooth as glass.

The Cinnabar boy moved his hands over the unseen surface, and discovered that, wherever they went, they left for a moment a strange phosphorescent-like trail.

In an instant a thought was carried out.

He caught Sierra Noll's hand, and drew him close to the wall.

"Where are we now?" he wrote with his finger, the letters showing for a moment and then disappearing.

"We are in the magic chamber," answered Sierra Noll in the same manner. "Beyond it lies the death web of Doctor Doubleface or Mesquite Marlo."

"Is Captain Poncho there?"

"Where else can he be? He fell into the trap set for him by the bandit-doctor. He was caught by the electric door-knob. If you had touched it you would not be right here now. You went to the window, the captain tried the door; that was the difference."

Mute Merle read these words with singular emotions.

"These walls carry echo," resumed Noll, writing as before. "If you had the full use of your ears you might hear some strange noises. I hear something now. Wait!"

Of course the boy mute could not see his companion lean suddenly toward the wall and place one ear against it, nor could he observe the expression of mingled mystery and surprise that overspread his face.

Suddenly these words appeared before Merle's eyes.

"As I live I heard the voice of a child!"

The young champion started from the wall, as if the malignant face of the dark doctor had suddenly appeared there.

"A child's voice?" he exclaimed by writing what his lips would have spoken.

"It called three times: 'Mother! mother! mother!'" replied Sierra Noll. "In the name of Heaven, how came a child in the underground web of Doctor Doubleface?"

Monte Merle stood thrilled and breathless before the revelation.

"Do you know what it means?" wrote Noll.

"Yes. The fate of a child brought us here. Captain Poncho and myself have sworn to find lost Carmen Lanca, who was carried off by Mesquite Marlo from Ranch 29. If you heard a child's voice, I must believe that the little one is near at hand. From which direction did the sound come?"

"It came along or through the wall, at my right," was the quick response. "But where the child is, if I really heard one's voice, I cannot tell. This web is known in its entirety to but two men—Doctor Doubleface and Night Eye, the web-keeper. I am almost certain that I heard the word 'mother' three times pronounced."

"From the right?"

"I thought so."

"To the right, then!" wrote Merle, dropping back and finding Sierra Noll's hand in the darkness.

They followed the wall to the right, touching it now and then in order not to lose its trend.

Mute Merle was still thrilled by the thought that he had at last struck Carmen Lanca's trail. But, he knew also that he had to contend with a man with two names—each of which was a synonym of cruelty, cunning and revenge.

He was thinking thus when Noll drew up and wrote on the wall before his eyes:

"I have heard the cry again! A child is somewhere in Doctor Doubleface's web."

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER THE SPELL.

MEANTIME Dr. Doubleface, the man of two lives as he was called by Sierra Noll, had finished his mysterious incantations over the young girl and left his house.

If he had discovered Mute Merle in the window, when the shutters opened, he did not betray himself in any way.

Certain it was that Zoe, under the influence of the mesmeric spell, had seen nothing of this. She awoke from her trance to find herself alone

and very weak. The light was burning low in the room and the door was locked.

If she could have followed Dr. Doubleface she would have come across him closeted with a large man with a lurid scar across one of his cheeks.

"Are you sure that your last guests are abed?" asked the doctor.

"I'm not sure of anything, nowadays," grinned the scarred person, who was Desert Dan, the proprietor of the Cute Catamount. "The young bonanza king of Cinnabar in this town makes me ready to believe anything. And Captain Poncho, too! Don't I recollect the swaggering pigmy who used to strut through Cinnabar like a turkey-cock, trying to mix up everybody in his quarrels with Major Mesquite? When I was publicly whipped by their court, didn't Captain Poncho stand off and tell the executioner where to strike? Know my two guests? I should say I do, doctor!"

"I see you are not likely to forget them," smiled Doctor Doubleface, his features getting a shadow. "I asked you a moment ago, Dan, if you are sure they still occupy the room upstairs?"

"That's easily settled," answered the Silver Bar landlord opening the stair door at the end of the long counter. "I'll report in a moment, doctor," and his bluff figure immediately vanished.

The dark doctor leaned against the bar and waited with his watchful eyes fixed upon the door.

He knew that one of the travelers was not upstairs, and he wanted to know what had become of the other.

Desert Dan was not gone more than three minutes.

"Not a sound can be heard beyond the door," he whispered as his eyes met those of Doubleface.

"Do you mean that the room is empty?"

"I don't just say that. Do you want to know, doctor?"

"I do."

The boniface of the Cute Catamount disappeared again, but this time by way of the porch.

"There's nobody there," he said coming back and showing the mysterious man a surprised face while he reported.

"Are you sure, Dan? I want no mistake made."

"I am sure. The room is empty."

For a moment Dr. Doubleface said nothing.

He drummed on his thigh with his fingers and seemed to look over Dan's shoulders at something on the door.

"I've been to the stable, too," added the landlord.

"Both horses are gone."

"Gone?" echoed the doctor in amazement.

"Gone they are."

"There can be no mistake in this either, Dan?"

"My eyes never deceive me."

It was curious to see how closely Desert Dan studied the sphinx-like face before him.

He did not know what to make of Dr. Doubleface.

"Good-night, Dan," abruptly rejoined the man of two lives, and he was permitted to reach the door before the big landlord spoke again.

"Pardon me, doctor," said he stepping forward and looking Doubleface in the eye. "We are friends, ain't we?"

"I hope so, Dan." And the speaker removed his hand from the latch and waited for the landlord to proceed.

"I think the two came to Silver Bar for a purpose totally different from their story," remarked Dan. "When I asked Captain Poncho about his companion he answered that he was Belden Bayne and that both of them were looking for a location. I could hardly hold in at this for I knew them both, but I let them go to bed and kept mum over the captain's lie. Now they've smelt the rat and vamoosed the ranch. I guess they suspected that I knew them. Mebbe on second thought they saw in me the victim of one of Cinnabar's courts. I haven't so much against the boy for he's an afflicted creature, but I would like to square accounts with Captain Poncho. Now, doctor," Desert Dan grew confidential and dropped his voice almost to a whisper, "now I wish you'd not interfere in my desires."

"Interfere?" cried Dr. Doubleface. "Why, you have just told me that your guests have run off."

A flush of confusion overspread the landlord's face. He caught the doctor's look and dropped his eyes.

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"I don't care what you do to Captain Poncho—when you find him," answered the man of mystery.

"Thank you! When I find him! Ha, ha!" exclaimed Dan, and without giving him a chance to prolong the interview, the doctor left the house.

"Yes, when you find him, Desert Dan," he hissed over his shoulder, as he threw a look of triumph toward the hotel from the street, not forgetting to take in the open window above the porch. "I give you full liberty to do what you please to Captain Poncho *then*. The boy is the lark I'm after now. In my mind he is the more dangerous of the two."

Dr. Doubleface did not immediately go back to his house.

He looked in upon several games visible from the street by the doors that stood wide open, but did not seem to find the person he was evidently seeking.

Ten minutes later he bent over the sleeping figure of Zoe on a couch in the room where we saw her last.

"What is it?" exclaimed the girl, opening her eyes at his touch, and seeing him standing before her.

"I want you to look for me," said he, with a smile, taking her hand, which she withdrew with a shudder.

"I can't, I can't. I am so weak I can hardly stand," cried Zoe.

"Oh, if that is all, you need not walk," and lifting her from the couch, he carried her into the room from the window of which Mute Merle had witnessed some startling events.

Placing the pallid girl in a chair at the table, Dr. Doubleface placed her under the weird spell which was one of his secrets, and when he had dropped some colorless liquid upon her lips he took one of her hands and bent over her.

"What do you see, Zoe?" he asked, his swimming black eyes transfixing her like lances.

The girl's lips moved in a singular murmur.

"What is it, I say? Tell me!"

The voice was couched in tones of command, and Zoe of the Web seemed to shrink even in her sleep from the mysterious master.

"I can see nothing for it is dark about me," answered Zoe, this time in a voice quite strong.

"Dark is it, Zoe?"

"Yes, yes. Put out your hand."

The spell-bound child obeyed, and seemed to grope like a person moving through intense gloom.

"I feel a wall now," said she. "I seem to be in a mine. Look! when I take my hand away its impress remains on the stone in faint fire."

Dr. Doubleface was on the point of turning Zoe's revelations into another channel when she spoke again.

"I'm not in the dark cavern any more."

"Where are you now?"

"I am in a lighted room. It is underground for all, for I see the stone and the floor is solid rock. In one corner is a little cot, just large enough for a child."

The dark doctor almost dropped the hand he was holding. A look of displeasure crossed his face.

"The wrong trail for me," he muttered. "I wanted her to see the boy, but her mind fights me. She must not go on at this rate. The walls about me are apt to have ears. Curse the luck I am meeting with! If I thought Mute Merle had left Silver Bar, I would follow; but I will not play my old role until I am sure he has fled. Would he desert Captain Poncho? The two seemed friends. They set out on the trail together. An oath binds them to perform a certain service. They were not to turn back with that service unperformed. I must play another hand. The girl is passing from the spell. I won't throw her back into it."

In another minute a changed light in the eyes of Zoe told that she had come out from under the mesmeric charm, but, her face was the color of snow, and her hands shook like aspen leaves.

"You'll get over this as you have done before," remarked the doctor in response to her exhausted look. "You can go back to the little room or remain here—just as you like."

With this he left her, passing from the house, but taking from a locked desk in one of the rooms something dark, which he hid in his bosom.

"If the boy leads me back to the plains or to the mountains, all right!" he exclaimed. "He started out to find Mesquite Marlo, but it will be the same if he discovers Doctor Doubleface. This is the maddest mission the young nabob of Cinnabar ever undertook, and before it is finished he will know better than to take up a wo-

man's quarrel for the sake of a child. As to the high-booted captain, I netted him nicely enough and the web holds him securely. I caught him as Doctor Doubleface; but the boy, if he leads me to my old stamping-ground, I'll net as Mesquite Marlo, the masked face."

He went down the winding street toward the mine in the mountain, and over the identical ground lately traveled by Sierra Noll and Mute Merle.

When he reached the shaft he plunged in, and found in the darkness a cord which hung along a stone wall.

This he jerked twice and listened.

In a little while his sleeve was grasped, and a voice said in low tones:

"The web still holds its own, captain."

"That is good, Night Eye. How many does it hold?"

"Four! It has caught two more since Captain High Boots came!"

CHAPTER VII.

SATANIC IMPUDENCE.

THE man by whom Dr. Doubleface, or Mesquite Marlo was met in the darkness of the shaft was a peculiar-looking person, that is, he would have appeared so if he could have been inspected by candle-light.

He had an owl-like face, but his figure was well-built and excellently proportioned. His eyes blinked unceasingly when touched by light of any kind, but like the orbs of the owl he could see objects in the darkest place, hence the appropriate name of Night Eye which had been bestowed upon him.

His blinking optics rendered him an odd-looking individual. He seldom came to the surface during the day, but on several occasions at night he had been seen to flit between the man-trap mine and his master's house.

Dr. Doubleface was startled by the announcement that the web held four prisoners.

"I do not deceive you," continued Night Eye. "Captain High Boots is safe enough, but he has company."

"What! you did not put the new prisoners in with him?" exclaimed the bandit.

"Not exactly that. I found them first in the magic chamber talking to each other on the wall."

"Who were they, Night Eye?"

"Sierra Noll for one; the other I do not know."

"A boy like Noll?" queried the doctor.

"Yes."

"It must be the person I want!"

"Come! You shall see them, captain. I will turn the light on. They cannot see us, you know."

Dr. Doubleface followed his guide deeper into the mine. They descended the ladder used but a short time before by Mute Merle and his companion and continued on.

After some little time Night Eye came to a halt and leaned toward his master.

"I have my hand on the knob. Shall I push it?"

"Yes."

"It is done," said a voice, a moment later and the twain moved up a narrow passage which promised to take them to the open air above.

Dr. Doubleface's ingenuity had furnished his underground web with some of the modern electric inventions. Night Eye, fertile in experiments in the dark, had ably seconded him, and the lighting of a certain part of the mine by pressing a knob was but one of the results of their cunning.

At length the two men halted in the dark passage and the bandit doctor placed his eyes to a hole in the wall. For a second he was almost blinded by a bright light, but by degrees he became accustomed to its glare.

"Are they there?" eagerly asked a voice at his side.

"Yes. Ha! the birds are caught, sure enough!" exclaimed the doctor.

He found himself looking down into a walled room not more than ten feet across. It was almost circular in shape and somewhat resembled a well. The walls were smooth and showed no break from the floor to the lofty ceiling.

There, hung in space by means of unseen wires, was a glass globe nearly as large as a man's head. From this streamed a strong light that revealed every inch of the cell, especially to one who looked down into it from the doctor's position.

In the middle of the chamber stood two youths apparently gazing at the light that hung over-

They were Mute Merle, of Cinnabar, and Sierra Noll, the bandit doctor's pest.

Their imprisonment can be briefly told.

After Sierra Noll's second hearing of the child's cry, the two boys had pressed on, feeling their way in the darkness.

Merle had confidence in the young guide into whose companionship he had been thrown by his singular fortunes, and Sierra Noll thought he knew the greater part of Dr. Doubleface's web.

Pushing forward without knowing that a stealthy step and a pair of prying, owl-like eyes were in their rear, they crept through a narrow opening, which Sierra Noll thought would bring them to a certain place. They had scarcely made the passage when a dull noise sounded behind him.

He sprang back and found the passage closed!

For a minute he stood beside Merle, appalled by the terrible catastrophe.

The walls of the stone cage were not phosphorescent like these of the chamber they had lately visited, but he could communicate by lip with his comrade.

Striking a match, Sierra Noll showed Merle the closed entrance of the trap which had caught them.

The face of the Boy Nabob blanched for a moment, then he took the light from Noll's hand and examined the door. It was set into the wall with great solidity, and he saw that it had been closed from the outside.

Such was the hopeless situation of the two boys when Night Eye, by pressing the knob in the ascending passage, threw on the light that now illuminated the cavern.

The coming of the light was magical. It showed them the high walls of their prison, but they could not see the triumphant eye of the robber doctor.

"You have them, sure enough," said Dr. Doubleface to the owl-eyed jailer who stood behind him. "I've been wanting to catch that troublesome Silver Bar Jonah for some time, and you have performed a valuable service, Night Eye. Be sure I won't forget it."

"I thought the new flies in the web would delight you," answered Night Eye. "They crawled into the cage of their own accord."

"What were they looking for, Night Eye?"

"Captain High Boots, probably."

A laugh rippled over the doctor's lips.

"They will not find him," he chuckled. "Captain Poncho, or High Boots, as you call him, Night Eye, is safe enough; as safe as the two fledglings down there. I've got enough of this."

And he turned away, and walked rapidly down the passage at the heels of the man whose strange eyes enabled him to see far ahead.

Dr. Doubleface kept on until he found himself beyond the mine.

"Four! What more should I ask for?" he exclaimed. "I ought to inform Madame Carmen that her champions are no match for Mesquite Marlo. She would like the news I know, and, by Jove, she ought to have it!"

Ere an hour later, the doctor of Silver Bar galloped from the town, and struck across the ghostly foot-hills.

Mile after mile his horse put behind them, and before morning he was in a changed country.

The mountains of Silver Bar no longer rewarded the roving eye, but, on the contrary, the country was gently rolling, with occasional clumps of timber, fine pasture lands, and now and then little strips of barren, with mesquite and cacti in scattering groups.

Evidently Dr. Doubleface did not fear recognition in that region, for he rode on through the warming light of the sun, with his horse as fresh as when the journey began.

The sun had scattered the few drops of dew from the pasture grass, when the man of two lives approached a collection of buildings in the center of a ranch.

One of these was the ranch residence, a fine house, decidedly Mexicanish in architecture, with the usual airy veranda in front, and a lot of southern vines over one-half of its front.

With his eyes fixed upon this building, Dr. Doubleface rode forward and drew rein alongside the porch.

He had been observed, for a man on the porch touched his hat as he came, to which salute the doctor replied with two dark fingers.

"Is Madam Lanca in?" queried the bandit.

"My mistress is at home," was the reply, followed by the opening of a door, and the sudden appearance of a beautiful young woman, with a pale, anxious face, and somewhat sunken eyes, indicative of a late sorrow.

She started slightly on seeing her visitor, but the next moment she addressed him in tones of welcome.

"I have called on business, madam," said Dr. Doubleface. "I have something important to communicate."

He was invited into the house, and in a little while he was face to face with Carmen's mother.

"I believe you have lately met with a misfortune?" he began.

"My child! My darling Carmen? What do you know about her?" cried Madam Lanca, unable to control herself.

A smile appeared at the corners of the bandit's mouth.

"What should I know about her?" he asked. "I am simply a gentleman, traveling through the country on business. Do you really think I know anything about your child, Madam Lanca?"

Was it a mother's intuition that suddenly riveted Carmen's gaze upon the face before her? If not, why did she quit her chair and step swiftly across the room?

The eyes of Dr. Doubleface followed her.

Reaching a dressing-stand Madam Carmen opened a drawer and caught up a silver-mounted revolver that lay there on a bit of black velvet.

"Not so fast, madam!" exclaimed a voice behind her, and, before she could turn her wrist, she was clutched, and saw the smooth face and the glowing eyes of her visitor pressed almost against hers.

"Where is my child, monster?" demanded Madam Lanca, pale and terribly excited.

"What! you want her still, do you?" was the response. "Ha, ha! I thought you would forget the pest of Ranch 29. I have come to tell you that your two champions have walked nicely into a trap, and that Mesquite Marlo holds all the best cards!"

"You are Mesquite Marlo!" cried Madam Lanca.

"Do you think so? Do I look like the gentleman who rides at night with a lot of cool blades at his back? Well, madame, have it so, if you like it thus. You haven't got enough in this world to ransom the child, and your champions are powerless to rescue any one. They cannot save themselves. As to the child—the daughter of the man who wanted to rid the world of Mesquite Marlo—she is dead to her kindred—forever dead!"

He dropped Madam Carmen's hand and saw her sink in a swoon at his feet; then, with a look at her and a laugh, he walked from the house and coolly rode away.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRAIL IN THE GRASS.

MESQUITE MARLO was still in sight, though a mere speck above the horizon, when Madam Lanca came out of her faint.

She refused to tell her frightened servants what had transpired, though all were ready to believe that her visitor had broken to her some secret concerning her child.

When they told her that the man was gone, she sent for a certain person in her employ.

When he came he was found to be a youngish man about Madam Lanca's height. He was not more than thirty, had a pair of very keen black eyes, and soft silken hands.

The fair owner of Ranch 29 motioned to him to close the door when he had entered the room.

"Harold, I have just had a visitor," she began.

"So I have understood," was the reply, and the speaker seemed to read in Madam Carmen's deep, lustrous eyes and heaving bosom something about the visit just concluded.

"Did you see him, Harold?"

"Only as he rode away with his back toward me."

"You did not know him then."

"I did not."

"Harold, that man was Mesquite Marlo."

Harold, the head herder of the ranch, gave his mistress a store of astonishment.

"He did not say so—no, he would not do that here, where he blighted my life, but the eyes I saw to-day—his eyes—were the same I saw the night Carmen left me. I photographed them on my mind, as it were. I could not see the face, you know, for a black mask hid that. To-day it had no covering, and I knew the eyes the moment I saw them in all their depths of expression. If his dark hand had not clutched mine when it did I should have forced the truth from him or killed him in his tracks."

"His death would have deepened the mystery," said Harold.

"But there would have been no Mesquite Marlo to rob other mothers!" was the quick response.

Madam Lanca proceeded to give her herder a concise account of Dr. Doubleface's visit, repeating his sentences word for word.

"When and where did he net Mute Merle and his companion Captain Poncho?" she inquired. "Or was that a falsehood coined for the purpose of deceiving me and destroying hope in my bosom?"

"A man like Mesquite Marlo will lie, madam," observed Harold.

"That is true, but he knows that I set champions upon the trail. If he has not beaten them, how should he know of their mission?"

The herder was silent.

"It must be seen how near he approached the truth," continued the mistress of the ranch. "I give you full control here, Harold."

"Me?"

"Yes. You must know that I am going to take the trail."

Madam Carmen spoke with resolution.

"So confident am I that I have seen Mesquite Marlo—that I even touched him to-day—that I intend to meet him on his own ground. You will say that I can not find him—that in going away he will be careful to hide his trail and change his identity. But, he cannot change his eyes, Harold, and his smooth Satanic face I will find in spite of its owner's caution."

"Madam Carmen, I will go," put in the herder at the first pause. "I know how to track a man as well as to trail cattle. I used to follow more than horses. I—"

"No! I am resolved. Mesquite Marlo has carried his coolness too far. He has shot his last arrow too true. Life without little Carmen is a desert without a drop of water. If he has killed my champions—if he has harmed a hair of my darling's head, he shall feel the swift, merciless vengeance of Carmen Lanca. A thousand thanks to you for your offer, Harold. I set out upon the marauder's trail alone. The next time a hand shall not hold me back."

The herder saw that it was useless to attempt to argue Madam Lanca out of her resolution, and, bidding her get ready, he went to the stables to saddle the best steed on the ranch.

When he came back, he was met by a person in the full equipments of a southern rancher, and for a moment he looked on, unable to speak from surprise.

"Not this garb for long, I trust," smiled Carmen, springing into the saddle and taking up the reins. "Why have you brought two horses, Harold?"

"To ride with you a little distance, if you do not object."

"Come, then!"

Together the two rode away over the trail taken by Dr. Doubleface, now for some time out of sight, and when a turn of the road showed them the open country to the south, Carmen held out her hand with a look at her companion.

"Good-by, Harold!" said she. "This is a fight to the death. I shall come back with the fate of little Carmen known to me or not at all."

The following moment she touched her horse with the spurs, and went down the trail amid a cloud of dust, not trusting herself to look back at the man trying to keep her in sight as if he was loth to part with her.

For a long time the keen, watchful eyes of Madam Carmen saw hoof-prints in the dust before her. She bent over her roan's neck and studied them while he bore her along.

Mile after mile the tracks led her almost due south; but all at once they left the trail and were lost among the grass of a plain which stretched away toward the west.

The beauty of the ranch halted and gazed across the open ground.

"My father told me once how to trail a horse over a plain," said she, speaking her thoughts aloud. "It is slow work sometimes, but I do not think I have forgotten the lesson."

She dismounted and led her horse forward by the bridle.

"It is here!" she exclaimed, rising from the inspection of a clump of grasses some of which were broken and pressed into the soft ground. "The trail becomes quite plain again, for the eye soon learns to distinguish the bent blades from the untouched ones. Mesquite Marlo, cool and shrewd as you are, I swear by the love I bear my child that you shall not escape me!"

The sun reached the meridian and beat upon the shadowless plain with undiminished power. It passed the line and began to droop toward the west, but the beautiful trailer kept on with

the track of some one—was it Mesquite Marlo?—as well marked as she had seen it on the dusty road.

If Dr. Doubleface had suspected a state of affairs of this sort, he might have exercised more caution than he did. He would not think that the woman he had left in a swoon in her own parlor would follow him with a man's resolution.

He had ridden away with a laugh, and a dozen times since he had chuckled over his success.

Night overtook him beyond the grassy plain. It found Carmen still among the parched blades, with her lips dry as powder and the fever of thirst in her veins.

Her horse had for some time been showing signs of fatigue, but she pressed forward to find herself enveloped by the shadows of night and still on the apparently boundless open.

At length she crossed the edge of the new country, and her horse stopping suddenly threw up his head and whinnied.

In a moment an answering sound came to Carmen's ears, and in a little while she found herself in front of a hut, from whose open door streamed a light, revealing the figures of two men.

"Water first!" cried the exhausted woman. "After that I will go on to the end of the hunt, for vengeance awaits me there."

The men exchanged puzzled glances, for the voice was a woman's, though the person in the saddle was clothed like a man.

They brought Carmen water from the hut, and when she had taken several reviving draughts, she leaned toward one of the pair.

"Who passed since sundown?" she asked.

"This is not the trail," was the evasive response.

"I know; but all people do not stick to the trail. You do not want to answer for nothing. You shall not," and Carmen tossed gold coin into the hand of the one who had spoken.

"We gave drink to the person before you," said he, his tongue loosening under the influence of the yellow eagle.

"What was he like?"

The herder described Dr. Doubleface with a faithfulness that sent a tingle of delight through Carmen's brain.

"That was the man we saw," finished the speaker. "I did not know he ever went so far from home."

Carmen went down toward the bullwhacker with a slight cry of eagerness.

"Ha! you knew him, then?" said she.

"I knew him. About five years ago I was a patient of his—not for long, but a patient all the same. He did not know me to-night, and I did not remind him of his services; but that face once seen cannot be forgotten."

"You are right. Now, who is the man you speak of?"

"He was called then, and I guess he owns the name yet, Doctor Doubleface."

Carmen, straightening in her saddle, looked at the herder in the light of a new revelation.

"Where did you have dealings with him?" she sent downward in eager voice.

"At Silver Bar. He lives there."

"Is Doctor Doubleface his real name?"

"I never heard of another."

"Then, gentlemen, you don't know him as well as I do!" exclaimed Carmen, her hand closing on the rein again. "Which is the shortest road to Silver Bar?"

She was told in a few words, the man making it plain to her in the singular lingo of the plains.

Once more she was on the trail.

"Now I know him!" she cried. "He can't hide from me. If I lose Mesquite Marlo, I shall find Dr. Doubleface. If Silver Bar is the lair of this masked tiger, to Silver Bar I go without any turnings!" and the horse, renewed by the brief rest, resumed his tireless gallop.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN PONCHO AND HIS PICK.

FOR some time after its sudden lighting, the suspended lamp in the round chamber continued to burn.

It afforded Mute Merle and his fellow-prisoner a good view of their situation, showed them the massive stone walls and the heavy door which some power by them unseen had closed without warning, and seemed to dissipate the last hope that remained.

For all this the young adventurers did not despair.

"We don't want the light," exclaimed Noll.

"If we work it must be in the dark."

His companion's nod confirmed this and the

doctor's pest picked up several stones from the floor of the cell.

Stepping back to the wall he threw them at the light—the third stone hitting it squarely and in an instant it was out.

It was a puzzle to Merle what his friend intended to accomplish in the darkness, but the two went together to the door and felt the bolt which had been shot into the stone from without.

Sierra Noll lit a match and shielding the flame with his hands examined the bolt with great care.

The broken globe of glass no longer revealed them to the person who had turned on its power, and the match showed them just enough to suit their purposes.

The boy from Silver Bar laid his hand on the bolt and looked at Merle.

"We must shove this back," said he, the mute champion reading his lips by the match. "We must do this or perish here unless Zoe, by chance, discovers the play that has been made. Hark! Somebody is pounding on the other side of the wall on our left," and Noll ran to the wall a few steps away and placed his ear against it while a look of curiosity filled his eyes.

He distinctly heard blows, the sound of which came through the stone.

"Is it Captain Poncho?" exclaimed the boy. "It cannot be the child, if she is as young as Merle has reported her. Some apartments in Doctor Doubleface's web have echoing partitions, but, as a rule, they are very thick. When I was last here I discovered that the earthquake shock of last summer made some queer changes. It cracked some of the walls and shut up half a dozen corridors. Ah! there go the blows again. I wonder if he can bear me?"

Noll was about to call to the person on the opposite side of the wall when his hand was seized in the gloom and he was led away.

Burning another match he saw the excited face of Mute Merle, and the boy champion's hand was breaking scales of stone from the wall, which, a few moments before, had felt so smooth.

"Some one is attacking the wall on the other side," said Noll, responding to Merle's inquisitive look. "Who it is and what sort of weapon he has found I do not know unless your comrade, Captain Poncho—"

The speaker paused abruptly, for a piece of rock, flat but quite large, fell at his feet.

"The earthquake must have ruined the web in many places," he went on. "This wall could crumble in a few minutes if properly attacked. Let the assailant on the other side keep on like a hero. He is coming to our rescue, Captain Merle!"

The boy prisoners stepped back from the wall to prevent from being struck by the pieces of stone that flew from it at every blow dealt on the opposite side.

Noll heard every stroke, and Merle knew by the flying particles that the unseen and unknown was sticking to his task.

"Thanks to the earthquake, we shall soon be out of this!" cried Dr. Doubleface's foe. "I wonder if Night Eye hears this attack? He has the ears of a fox as well as the eyes of an owl. Where can the web's guardian be if he is ignorant of all this?"

By and by the storm of blows ceased, and the silence that followed was, for a moment, most intense.

"I'm through at last," said the voice of a man apparently out of breath. "This is working for life, sure enough, and I've earned every breath I get now. What's ahead of me? Darkness! Another wall to batter? By Jove! if there's a dozen I'll shatter them all. Better this than to let Dr. Doubleface hold all the trumps and play the game out to his liking."

Noll let the speaker talk himself out; then he sprang forward and found a jagged opening through which he could barely thrust his hand.

"Captain Poncho, is it?" he exclaimed.

An outburst of surprise was the quick response.

"If you are Captain Poncho you have done Mute Merle and I a valuable service."

"Mute Merle, eh? Is he in this infernal web? I am Captain Poncho, of Cinnabar. Who are you?"

Sierra Noll answered in a few words.

"By Jupiter! this is royal luck in misfortune!" cried the little sport. "When I came to myself after being cleverly caught by the electric door-knob of the doctor's house I was tied in a heavy chair and surrounded by Egyptian darkness. The work had been well done, by whom I know not, for, after being caught, a towel saturated with chloroform was thrown

over my face and I became unconscious. The cell I am in is one that has no door. Nature formed it without one. I must have been lowered into the place."

"You are in the chair no longer, Captain Poncho?" eagerly inquired the boy Silver Bar.

"No! It did not hold me very long after hand and brain got to work in earnest. I twisted out of the cords, which is not a new trick of mine, for once when I was dead-broke among the Colorado camps, I got a new start by playing the rope-tying game for the amusement of the toughs. In one corner of this chamber I found the remains of a miner's pick. Why remove it beyond reach of a man tied and left to die in a chair? How the wall on your side must have crumbled while I worked."

"The earthquake did it," replied Sierra Noll.

"There'll be another earthquake in Silver Bar before long! If I'm not mistaken it will shake Doctor Doubleface out of his boots. Stand back, and take Merle out of the way. I am going for the wall again."

It was the work of a few minutes for the industrious Poncho to enlarge the opening sufficient to let him join the boys.

With a cry of joy he seized Mute Merle's hand and felt his own fervidly squeezed in return.

"Now for freedom!" he exclaimed. "Show me the bolt, Sierra. A few blows on the earthquake-touched wall ought to let us out."

The iron bolt which the boys had examined without much hope was soon found and Captain Poncho again went to work.

The temper of his pick proved of the very best and it broke the rock that held the bolt until he pushed it back with his hands.

"Who keeps this jail?" asked the captain.

"Night Eye, a man who knows nothing but obedience to Doctor Doubleface."

"Why isn't he on guard?"

"I don't know."

"I heard my blows echo like the hammer of a demon blacksmith."

"Yes. They more than once stilled my heart from fear. Something uncommon must have driven Night Eye from his post. I wonder—"

"Wait, boy! Merle is talking to me with his fingers beating a telegraphic tattoo on the back of my hand. We have a language which can be used in the dark. What is this he is saying? Did you hear the voice of a child in this web?"

"I heard it," said Sierra Noll.

"So Merle says. But, you could not locate it?"

"I could not."

"This confirms the suspicion that took possession of my thoughts the moment the dark doctor came into the bar-room of the Cute Catamount, and caught my eye. We have found Mesquite Marlo, and, if I'm not mistaken, little Carman Lanca is not far off."

The three were not slow to quit the chamber by the door which had been opened by Captain Poncho's pick.

"How many apartments does this spider's labyrinth contain?" suddenly asked the man in high boots.

"Fifty at least," returned Noll.

"Do you know them all?"

"No."

"Some of them, eh?"

"Yes."

"Where is the jailer's lodge?"

"I know where it was a year ago."

"Can you find the path in the dark?"

"I think I can when I get my bearings."

"Get them, then. I am anxious to feel my hands at Night Eye's throat. He can see in the night, you say?"

"Like an owl!"

"Does a light blind him?"

"It renders him practically helpless so far as sight is concerned."

Captain Poncho laughed. "Then we'll hunt for him with fire!" he exclaimed.

He had no sooner said this than a stone, rolling down the corridor in which the three stood, stopped against the wall.

"Night Eye is up yonder!" whispered Sierra Noll.

In an instant Captain Poncho picked up the stone which had rolled down the dark incline, and drew back.

"Fortune guide this!" said he, and then with all his power he hurled the missile from him.

A terrible cry followed the throw.

CHAPTER X.

THE BRAVE DEFIANCE.

"You have hit—you have winged the owl guard of the death-trap!" exclaimed Noll, at

sound of the sharp cry which had followed Captain Poncho's throw in the dark.

"I told fortune to guide the bowlder!" returned Poncho, grimly. "I don't hear him any more."

"Nor do I," answered the boy. "Bunch all the matches you have, and we will then go forward!"

"I have none. The hawks that caught me deprived me of everything."

Thereupon Dr. Doubleface's enemy struck one of the strange matches, which sent out a dazzling light, and all three moved up the corridor, the little man in high boots in the advance.

"Hello! here is my bird!" suddenly exclaimed the captain, bending over a human figure, which, lying in the narrow passage, almost blocked it up.

"That is Night Eye," replied Sierra Noll, holding his torch close to the death-like face, on one side of which was an ugly cut. "You have killed the keeper of the web, captain."

"Not so bad as that," smiled Captain Poncho. "The stone went straight to the mark, though. He has opened his eyes. Hold the light a little behind you, boy."

Sierra Noll did so, and Night Eye attempted to rise, but Captain High Boots, as he had named the man from Cinnabar, pushed him back again with a powerful display of strength for one so small.

"I think you know us," said Poncho. "Your old earthquake-shaken trap can't hold anybody very long."

Night Eye scowled darkly, and growled out something which the listeners did not understand.

"Where is the child?" demanded Captain Poncho, still holding him down.

"What child?"

"Come, come, sir! A man of your ilk don't serve his master without knowing all the secrets of the game. Will you tell the truth, Night Eye?"

The man on the ground said nothing.

"Silence may prove fatal to your future career," remarked Poncho. "The whereabouts of the little girl are known to you; so is the double life of the man you serve."

"I serve Doctor Doubleface."

"And Mesquite Marlo."

Night Eye shook his head, and scowled again.

"I am told," whispered Sierra Noll, at the captain's ear, "that a light held close to his eyes renders him as weak as a child."

"Try it," instantly came back.

The following moment Night Eye shrunk from a brilliant light with a sharp cry of pain. He tried to free his hands to use them as a shade, but his captor prevented.

"Anything if you will take the fire away!" he cried. "It fills my eyes with red-hot arrows. Five minutes of this would kill me."

"The light will be removed upon one condition."

"What is that?"

"You must take us to little Carmen Lanca."

"I will! I will! Remove the fire or I shall perish."

"Take us straight to the place—as straight as these dark corridors will permit," continued Captain Poncho.

"Put out the light. I can see like an owl in the dark."

Noll blew out his tiny torch, and Night Eye rose.

He found one of the vise-like hands of the high-booted sport at his wrist. It was a grip equal to that of a steel manacle, and it would have taken a power which he did not possess to have shaken it off.

Thus held by Captain Poncho on one side, and Mute Merle on the other, the jailer of Dr. Doubleface's prison moved away.

"Gentlemen," said he, after some silence, "you can't get away from here."

"Why not?" asked Poncho.

"The web is not only underground. It extends above the mine as well."

"I ought to know that, for I was caught above ground," replied the dwarfish sport with a smile which Night Eye did not see.

"How did you get out, Captain Poncho?"

"I wriggled out of the chair and attacked the wall with the old pick you left with me. I have told you that the earthquake of last summer proved my friend."

"The wall crumbled where you struck it, eh?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. The web is not what it used to be."

For some time nothing more was said.

Captain Poncho and his companions began to grow uneasy. They did not know whither Night Eye was leading them. He knew the cavern, they did not, and he might be plotting some diabolical revenge in the dark.

Suddenly the doctor's jailer halted and said to the captain:

"We are here. Release my hand so that I can find the key."

"Which hand?"

"The one you hold."

Captain Poncho did so, but at the same time he caught the other wrist just above Merle's grip.

"I dare not give this underground Cerberus too much string," he was saying to himself, when three stunning blows were rained upon him in bewildering succession.

Such Samsonian strokes no human could endure and keep his feet.

It seemed to Captain Poncho that each one was crushing in its effects. At any rate, they knocked him against Mute Merle, who was thrown off his feet, and before either of the three could recover Night Eye was gone!

This unexpected turning of the tables did not occupy a second.

Captain High Boots sprung to his feet as quickly as possible, with his brain in a whirl and demon lights dancing before his eyes.

"He is gone!" exclaimed Sierra Noll, who had lit a match, and was staring at the dazed man in the corridor.

"The devil was in him," were the captain's first words. "I never felt such blows as they were, and I've been pretty well hammered before now. There is no telling what Night Eye will do, nor with what sort of power he can and will arm himself, with Doctor Doubleface's assistance. Let us go up where the sunlight is, and fight Mesquite Marlo on different ground. I don't like to risk my life in the dark. Hold the match where Merle can see me talk by its light."

Sierra Noll obeyed, and Captain Poncho leaned toward the Boy Champion.

"Secrecy is no longer necessary," said he.

"Of course not," replied Merle, talking rapidly with his wonderful fingers. "And in this web we can do nothing. Doctor Doubleface, by this time, is as well informed of our mission as we are ourselves. We must go up and beard the lion in his den."

"That is it!" exclaimed Captain High Boots. "I've got my blood stirred now—I guess those sledgehammer blows did it. Back to the ladder, if Night Eye hasn't cut it loose, Noll! It may be three against fifty, but I sha'n't turn my face toward Ranch 29 without my part of the mission fulfilled."

Led by the youth of Silver Bar, Merle and Poncho went back to the wall ladder, which appeared intact.

Once more they found themselves in the main upper shaft of the web, and soon afterward all three walked out into the warm sunlight of another day.

Already the terrible punishment received by Captain Poncho was manifested in a swelled face, and he no longer looked like his former self.

His waxed mustache drooped sorrowfully, and his clothes bore marks of his imprisonment and escape.

"We again become the guests of the Cute Catamount," he said to Mute Merle, who responded with a firm nod.

"This doublefaced doctor sha'n't get another grip on us. If his people don't know that he is the Masked Marauder of the plains, by Jupiter! we'll enlighten them."

"They don't know it," remarked Sierra Noll. "It is unknown to Zoe, even, for I have kept the secret, though the doctor knows that it is in my possession."

"Where did Doctor Doubleface come from?" queried Captain Poncho.

"I don't know."

"Was he here when you came?"

"He was."

"The boss of the town—the mysterious ruler of the mines and their toughs?"

"Yes."

"Who is Zoe?"

"A young girl who wants to break from him but is prevented by his strange arts."

"Why doesn't she run off when Doctor Doubleface is playing Mesquite Marlo?"

"She is held back by fear. You don't know this scourge of mountain and plain, Captain Poncho. The Southwest has never had his equal. I have gone to Zoe and begged her to fly with me during his absences, but his shadow

holds her back. She knows what would follow recapture after flight."

"Death?"

"Undoubtedly death!"

Captain Poncho brought his lips together and went on without a reply.

The most surprised man of the day in Silver Bar was Desert Dan, the landlord of the Cute Catamount, when a smallish man with a swollen face, followed by Mute Merle, walked into his establishment.

For once Desert Dan was quite alone, and while he stared he leaned over the counter and exclaimed:

"In the name of the Saints, man, what did you run against?"

Captain Poncho smiled grimly at the inquiry, and answered it in like strain:

"From the way my face feels I must have met a biffer in motion."

"Or an earthquake!" grinned Dan.

"Neither, to tell the truth," answered Night Eye's victim with stern soberness. "You must know it some time, so you shall have it now. I met the owl-eyed jailer of Doctor Doubleface's underground web. We have just come up from that chamber of darkness and terrors. We have incurred the undying hatred of the man who is said to carry Silver Bar in his pocket. He knows why we are here; he will try to crush us as he has crushed others. We know more of him than his people do, and without rushing to the collision which is inevitable, we—this boy and I—Captain Poncho and Mute Merle—defy from this hour Doctor Doubleface and his minions! There! it is out and we stand by it!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE DEAD JAILER.

It was a defiance that savored of foolhardiness, but Captain Poncho was in a frame of mind to put forth an utterance of that sort, and to stand by it to the very last.

Desert Dan looked the surprise he felt, and it was a full minute before he found his tongue.

"That's putting it pretty plain," said he addressing Captain Poncho though he looked at Mute Merle at the same time.

"I'm always plain. You ought to know that," replied the captain.

"What do you mean?"

"You've seen me on my native heath. Merle knows you as well as I do. We did not expect to find you here, but old faces are constantly turning up. So you think we had better not defy Doctor Doubleface in his own lair."

"I did not just say so, captain."

"But you looked that way."

"Did I? Well, that being the case, I don't mind telling the truth. Doctor Doubleface has lots of friends."

"That is if he does carry Silver Bar in his pocket as they say?"

"I guess he does," answered Desert Dan. "That is, affairs here go about the way he guides them."

Captain Poncho looked at his companion.

"Since we have planted ourselves for the right, we might as well prepare for the next scene," said he. "Captain Dan, we'll just settle our bill and shift for ourselves elsewhere."

"There's no charge," responded the landlord. "You need not tear yourselves away unless you're prejudiced against the Catamount or its proprietor. The room occupied for a while is still at your service, and I'll board you for nothing before I'll see you go to the snide hash-shop across the street. I have memories of Cinnabar that ain't very pleasant, but I'm not going to rake 'em up here."

Captain Poncho's reply was forestalled by a heavy step on the porch, and a stalwart man in high boots walked into the room.

He looked through a heavy fringe of dark lashes at the two champions as if his surprise at seeing them there was very great; but dismissing them for a moment, he swaggered to the counter and leaned across it, meeting Desert Dan half way.

"Murder has been committed!" Captain Poncho heard the stranger say.

"Murder?" echoed the landlord.

"Yes. Night Eye has been found dead just within the mine, and on the wall he left a record which fastens the crime upon certain parties."

If Mute Merle could have seen the moving lips of the speaker, he would have started at the revelation, but they were shadowed by a bronze hand as if to keep the information from him.

"They'll be here in a minute," continued the man at the counter.

Captain Poncho seemed to understand that he and Merle were menaced.

In an instant, a glance which was a whole sentence passed between the pair.

"Let 'em go," muttered the big man. "They can't get away. Night Eye's written words fixes the crime upon them, and they are in the death-net, for the boys'll meet them on the street."

Captain High Boots and the Boy Nabob walked out upon the porch to find themselves observed by a crowd of rough-looking men, who at that moment came into the street from a straggling way which led to the mouth of Dr. Doubleface's mine.

"Here they come!" exclaimed the little man, his hand moving swiftly to his pocket, while a determined expression settled upon his face, but in a second the hand was withdrawn, for the pocket was empty, the work of the bandit doctor having left him weaponless.

The crowd came on and stopped in front of the porch.

Mute Merle looked at his friend and then into the sullen faces by which he was confronted.

"Captain High Boots, eh?" asked a man, stepping from the crowd and sternly eying the dwarf Croesus.

"I am Captain Poncho," was the quick reply.

"But you might be called High Boots from them," continued the stranger, pointing at the leather boots which topped the captain's knees.

"Just as you like. We won't quarrel over the name," said Poncho. "What is it you want, gentlemen?"

The crowd drew nearer at this.

"We're compelled to arrest both of you, the leader went on. "You can break the intelligence to your companion, who can understand you, though he is a mute. As I've said, we have to take you in."

"For what?"

"For murder."

A grin came to the swollen lips of Captain Poncho.

"Do we look like assassins?" he inquired.

"I'm not quite as good-looking now as I was when we first came; but we haven't helped any one out of the world."

"The record on the wall says different."

"The record, eh?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"Just inside the shaft."

"What shaft?"

"The one leading into Doctor Doubleface's mine. If you want to see it, we'll escort you thither."

"In the first place, where is the person who left the record?"

"Oh, he is thar, too."

"Show me the man and his work!" exclaimed Captain Poncho. "Come, Merle. We won't run from a charge of this kind, and woe to the one who falsely accuses us!"

Mute Merle stepped forward with a promptness which drew looks of admiration from the congregated toughs.

In another minute the two friends found themselves among the Arizonians, and the about-face was quickly executed.

"I didn't hurt Night Eye enough to send him out of the world," thought the captain. "It is impossible! If he is dead where the man said, some enemy of ours has left the lying record to shield himself and to tighten the noose about our necks. By Jupiter! these fellows will discover that innocent people are not easily hung—not even where Doctor Doubleface has everything his own way."

The two champions were marched directly to the mouth of the mine.

There were fifty men about them, but as a guard this was unnecessary, for the friends had no thought of attempting to escape.

A few feet beyond the mouth of the opening and on a blanket lay the body of a man.

It was gaunt and rigid, and one of the hands pointed toward the wall at the right.

Instinctively both Merle and Captain Poncho looked in that direction and those who crowded forward eyed them with a great deal of curiosity.

"That's what he left behind," said the leader of the crowd as the champions caught sight of some scratching on the stone. "You can see that it's disconnected, like the work of a man who had death at his heartstrings while he wrote."

"I see," returned the captain, while he mastered the scrawl which, when fully deciphered, read as follows:

"I am dying . . . got my cheeks from three persons . . . from Captain High Boots, the dumb boy . . . and . . . from . . . Men of Silver Bar . . . avenge me!"

Both Captain Poncho and Merle read the writing, reaching the last words at the same time.

"It is false, gentlemen!" exclaimed the young nabob, facing the crowd with no signs of fear on his face. "I know nothing about the death of the man called Night Eye. We encountered him awhile ago, but not where he lies. We were freeing ourselves from a trap when he came upon us. No weapons were used in the struggle that took place. I had none, for the power that made me a prisoner stripped me of all such things. The dead man escaped from us by playing a neat trick. You see the marks of his fist on my face. I speak for my companion, as well as for myself. The hand that says in writing as you see it yonder that we took Night Eye's life records an infamous lie against the innocent. The boy denies it, too. Look for your selves."

Mute Merle had taken his tablet from his bosom, and in a moment his pencil had dashed across its surface words like these:

"We took no life! The hand that left the record on the wall left a lie!"

He stepped forward and thrust the tablet into the hands of the captain of the crowd.

"Read it out, Magog!" cried the men.

Magog did so in a loud voice.

"He takes his cue from Captain High Boots," said some one. "Didn't you see how he watched his pard while he talked?"

"We are ready for trial," cried Captain Poncho, singling out the man who had just spoken. "Impanel your jury and open your court. It is true that we are strangers here—friendless in a strange land—but our mission is one of right, and we don't intend to desert it, no, not even when we find a dark charge of this sort in our way."

"What do you think?" inquired the Silver Bar captain, pointing at the dead.

"I say that Night Eye was either killed by some enemy as yet unknown, or that he took his own life rather than meet the man whom he served."

"Doctor Doubleface?"

"Yes."

"My impression is that this is a case of suicide from chagrin and defeat."

"The death of that man yonder?"

"The death of Night Eye."

A half-suppressed laugh of derision and incredulity went through the crowd.

"We won't discuss this affair here," continued Captain Poncho, coolly. "Convene the Court of Silver Bar at your leisure, gentlemen. Consult Doctor Doubleface—"

"He isn't home now, interrupted Magog.

The man in high boots looked at Merle.

"We don't have to wait for him, though. The Court of Silver Bar is always in session, and we can try you two now as well as to-morrow."

"Suit yourselves."

The answer was accompanied by a disdainful smile, and Captain Poncho and Merle were marched back by the bronzed guard which had brought them to the mine.

CHAPTER XII.

ZOE AND MAGOG.

THIS procession was seen by a young girl who from one of the windows of Dr. Doubleface's house saw it as it came back from the mine.

Her sharp eyes made out the forms of the two prisoners among the mountain-men who watched them like a pack of hawks.

Zoe of the web was not at that time in a condition to help the unfortunate pair whose situation undoubtedly enlisted her sympathies.

She saw that Mute Merle had not obeyed the note of warning which she had carried to him across the roof of the hotel porch, and knowing nothing of his adventures in the mine, she wondered why he had not saved his life by flight.

The procession was watched by her until it passed out of sight among the shanties.

"Something terrible has happened, or the men of Silver Bar would have the two in their power," murmured Zoe. "I must know what has taken place. It is true that I am not expected to quit this house before Doctor Doubleface returns, but my curiosity can't remain curbed."

She ran into an adjoining room and seized a cord which hung along the wall.

This she jerked twice and then went back to the window.

In a short time a man was seen advancing upon the house with rapid step.

"It is Magog whom I saw a moment ago at the head of the guard!" exclaimed Zoe. "The call was not long finding him."

Magog entered the house and stood before her.

"Did you call, miss?" he inquired, touching his hat politely. "I thought it might be the doctor yet I wondered what should bring him back so soon."

"I am alone, Captain Magog," answered the girl. "I thank you for your promptness. What has occurred?"

"Murder has been committed."

"Who is the victim?"

"Night Eye!"

"The guard of the web!"

"Yes."

"Who killed him?"

"Ah!" smiled big Magog. "The court is going to get at that if possible."

"Who is accused?"

"Two people who have come lately."

"The man and his friend?"

"Captain High Boots and the Mute Nabob of Cinnabar at the north."

Zoe thought for a moment.

"It is a startling event, Captain Magog," she went on. "I wish you would tell me all you know about it. But, first, let me refresh you."

Magog touched his hat again.

Zoe left the room but soon returned bearing before her on a tray a bottle of wine and a chased goblet. Magog's eyes sparkled when he saw the glistening green seal.

With dextrous fingers the fair girl opened the bottle and poured out a full glass, then she watched the big hand of the giant take up the wine and dispose of it at a single draught.

"Certainly, Miss Zoe," assented Magog volubly. "I know about as much as any one concerning the arrest and the evidence in hand. There's not much of the latter beyond the last written words of Night Eye; but they'll prove enough for the tribunal of Silver Bar."

With this prefatory observation Magog proceeded to give an account of the events just witnessed by the reader.

Zoe listened without once interrupting him, and once or twice she helped the narrative by glancing from Magog to the wine, which glances, as a matter of course, were taken as invitations and treated accordingly.

"What do you think, Magog?" asked the girl, when the story had been spun to a conclusion.

"Guilty, miss," answered the big man, curtly.

"Don't be too quick to condemn, Captain Magog," spoke Zoe.

"I don't want to be; but do you think a dying man would go into the dark with a lie on his lips? Ay, why should he?"

"That is it—why should he?" repeated Zoe, and the tenants of the room looked at each other.

"I think your court should go slow," continued the doctor's *protegee*.

"It will open within an hour."

"Must it do so?"

"The feeling is all that way."

"I thought it would wait for Doctor Doubleface."

"No; the Court of Silver Bar is separate and apart from him. He is nabob here, and carries the camp in his pocket, as it were, but the tribunal works when he is away as well as when he is at home. Besides, miss, it will make no difference to the prisoners. I don't see how they are going to get round the record on the wall."

"What do they say?"

"Captain High Boots and his pard?"

"Yes."

"Oh, they deny it, of course."

"But they were in the mine?"

"They were—under Night Eye's charge, too."

"Captain Magog," and Zoe's eyes were fixed upon the man as she pronounced his name; "do you know what brought them to Silver Bar?"

The big tough slowly shook his head.

"Does anybody know?"

"No one, unless it be Sierra Noll."

Zoe appeared to start just the slightest when the name was spoken.

"Why should he know?" she inquired.

"He lets nothing escape him, at least that is the opinion in camp," said Magog. "Besides, Miss Zoe, if Captain High Boots and Mute Merle are against Doctor Doubleface in any way, Noll would be apt to help them."

"You mean that he does not like the doctor?"

Magog dropped his eyes with a smile.

"I can't believe the prisoner guilty unless they killed Night Eye in escaping from the web," the girl presently continued. "We must not condemn the innocent. The tribunal of the camp can't afford to sentence them if there is a doubt in their favor."

"Then let them keep their word. Captain High Boots declares that they are ready for trial. Would a man thus accused say this if he had no proof for himself?"

Zoe made no reply.

Magog watched her narrowly over the rim of the glass which he raised to his lips and as he lowered it slowly he leaned across the table and said in lowered voice:

"Miss Zoe, can you go into your strange trance for any one?"

Dr. Doubleface's young *protegee* seemed to start and her face flushed to the temples.

"Don't take offense," Magog hastened to say. "I didn't mean to nettle you. I only asked because if you could go into the spell now you might see a loop-hole of escape for the prisoners."

"You forget that you are on forbidden ground," exclaimed Zoe.

"I know, and I wouldn't mention it here only in a case of life and death as this one is."

"Captain Magog, I will give you a secret which I have kept from Doctor Doubleface," and Zoe took his hand as she spoke. "Into the other room and asked no questions! This is, as you say, a question of life and death. I can go into the strange condition without the doctor being near, but I find that some person must be by to question me. Will you do it?"

"Yes!"

Zoe closed behind them the door of the room which they had entered.

"Now, Captain Magog, I will pass into a sleep which, in some respects, will resemble the eternal one of death. Don't let my change of countenance alarm you. When my hand slips from the table and falls at my side, bend over me and ask me what I see, and for Heaven's sake don't miss a word!"

The giant of Silver Bar with wonder in his eyes promised to obey her in every particular.

The girl seated herself at the table and lay back in a chair.

For a moment she looked at Magog with all the will power she could command, then her eyes seemed to lose their lifelike brilliancy and the pink lids closing at last, left her like one from whom life had fled.

Magog looked on astonished, but when he saw the bloodless hand of Zoe quit the table and drop at her side, he bent over her with breathless eagerness.

"What do you see, Zoe?" he exclaimed. "What is the truth about the dead man in the mine and the handwriting on the wall?"

In a second, as it were, the pallid face got a tinge of color, then the lips parted, and Captain Magog bent still lower.

"I see a man coming down a dark pathway between solid walls," he heard. "He carries in his hand a knife whose long, bright blade lies along his sleeve. It is Night Eye, the jailer of the web. Now he reaches a spot where the light falls; it is near the mouth of the mine. He stoops and writes on the stone with the point of his knife. It is hard work for the wall is hard, but he perseveres. Ah! he has finished, and now he feels the point of the knife. I see him brace himself against the wall, having opened his shirt with his left hand. He holds the knife above his head, looks at the blade a moment, grinds his teeth until they appear to crack, and then strikes at his own heart!"

"My God!" exclaimed Magog, falling back with distended eyes riveted upon the girl.

His cry seemed to rouse Zoe; she trembled and opened her eyes, then she uttered a wild shriek.

Dr. Doubleface had come back!

CHAPTER XIII.

MUTE MERLE "TALKS."

BIG Magog, wheeling at the first intonation of Zoe's piercing scream, saw the dark, stern man who had entered with the tread of a cat.

The two men looked at one another for a moment, when the finger of Dr. Doubleface pointed at the pallid girl in the chair and he said:

"What does this mean? Captain Magog, don't you know that I did not ring for you?"

"I do," answered Magog, returning the bandit's look. "If you knew what had happened in camp, or rather at the mine, you might not question me so sternly."

"I do know. Murder has been committed. The invaders have killed Night Eye. I am not ignorant of the catastrophe. To your room, Zoe, and leave me with Captain Magog."

The girl looked at both men, but more particularly at the giant, as if cautioning him to be silent on a certain subject, and in a moment was gone.

"I did not get to ask Magog what I saw from the chair," she said to herself; "but, never mind, I will know before long. Mute Merle and his companion are not responsible for the jailer's death. I will not believe it; but if the Court of Silver Bar convenes, with Doctor Doubleface to direct it, the friends are in the shadow of death."

Meantime the bandit doctor had laid his hand upon Magog's sleeve, and seemed to be looking into his innermost mind through his eyes.

"Guilty or not guilty, captain?" he asked.

Magog hesitated.

The big man had caught the language of Zoe's eyes, as expressed by her parting look, and had inwardly resolved not to betray her.

"If you mean the prisoners, the tide is dead against them," he answered.

"I mean Captain Poncho and his friend."

"Then you have my opinion."

Dr. Doubleface looked pleased.

"Go out and convene the tribunal," he went on. "If you have any witnesses, produce them. Make it swift and sure. What evidence have you?"

"The record of the wall."

"That's enough!"

Magog went away, and Dr. Doubleface, going to the window, watched his retreating figure until it vanished.

"I am back in the nick of time!" he exclaimed. "By some means which the dead lips of Night Eye will never disclose, the web was broken. The flies succeeded in getting away, until my jailer came up with them at the entrance. There, according to the record, they fell upon him and left him behind—dead! But the real prize is still safe. The mother, whom I left in a swoon in her splendid parlor, thinks Mesquite Marlo a fiend incarnate, ha, ha, ha! I am all that to her, and others won't have a better opinion of me by sundown. Mute Merle was eager to quit his domain, to recover the lost little beauty of Ranch 29. He may have repented ere this. Once in the grip of Mesquite Marlo, always there! Once in Doctor Doubleface's power, never more out of it."

He paused for a moment, and looked at his watch.

"Why not?" he suddenly proceeded. "I am autocrat here, and I am eager to tell the fools from the North that meddling with my affairs is attended with danger."

Ten minutes afterward a crowd on the porch of Desert Dan's hotel saw the figure of the man of two lives approaching.

Tidings of his return had already gone over the entire camp and he was watched with interest and curiosity as he came up.

Hats were politely touched in his honor by fingers better used to the revolver than to this service, and he returned the salutations with several stiff bows as he passed into the house.

As Mute Merle and Captain Poncho were in the bar-room under guard the crowd followed Dr. Doubleface, eager to see what would happen.

He crossed the step and waved his hand at the man behind the counter, then following a quick glance of Desert Dan's eye he espied the pards from Cinnabar.

At sight of him Captain Poncho started up, and several men who saw the sudden flash that beamed in the little mine-king's eye stepped toward Dr. Doubleface as if to protect him.

"I am here!" cried Poncho, reddening with anger to his temples. "We are both here."

"So I see," answered Dr. Doubleface allowing his gaze to flit to the Boy Nabob who was studying him closely. "If I am not mistaken, you find yourselves in an unpleasant situation. The northern climate is healthier than this for people of your temperament."

Merle who had watched the speaker's lips sprang to his feet. He looked first at Captain Poncho, whose return glance besought him to calm himself; but, as well might he have raised his hand against a cyclone.

Dr. Doubleface turned full upon the boy who was now the center of attraction.

"What is it?" he inquired. "You can read the human lip they tell me. Why didn't you stay among your ducats, eh, Bonanza Merle?"

Out flew the tablet from the young man's bosom and his pencil went across it three times with wondrous rapidity.

Dr. Doubleface took it from Merle's hand and looked at the writing.

"I want to right a wrong," he read. "Justice and nothing else drew me from Cinnabar."

"Oh, that is it, eh?" laughed the bandit-doctor handing the tablet back. "Well, my young hunter, what have you discovered?"

"This!" wrote Merle—"that Carmen Lanca's child is in Mesquite Marlo's power and that the Masked Marauder is Doctor Doubleface of Silver Bar."

The man of two lives seemed to read the answer in a glance.

His lip curled scornfully as he thrust the tablet into Mute Merle's hand.

"What good is the discovery to do you?" he queried. "Look about you. These men are not the pards of Cinnabar, chosen to stand by you in every scheme of your busy brain. They are not the minions of Captain Poncho, whose name, with yours, appears in ineffaceable characters on a certain wall not far from here, engraved there by a hand now stiff and cold."

A number of more than muttered curses arose from the press of stalwart toughs at the speaker's back.

"You can't crystallize sentiment against us," broke in Captain Poncho, addressing Dr. Doubleface. "The so-called Court of Silver Bar has already adjudged us, but that does not make us guilty. I don't know what my partner has communicated, but I can guess. What he says I stand by."

"To your sorrow, perhaps."

"So be it!" exclaimed Captain High Boots.

"We left Cinnabar on a mission as righteous as ever engaged the service of man. We did not have to go. Our mines are pouring out wealth day after day. The Live Rattlesnake and the Golden Slipper are worth more than all your guarded and haunted bonanzas. We don't have prison-cells in our mines, nor electric door-knobs to our houses."

Dr. Doubleface grinned derisively.

"Gentlemen of Silver Bar, we came from the North at the prayers of a mother," and Captain Poncho turned to the bulk of the crowd, while the doctor's face got crimson. "Not long ago the happiest ranch in the Round Basin was Ranch 29."

"Hold!" thundered Dr. Doubleface. "This is not the time nor place for the story of your mission. Captain Poncho, your name stands out on the wall of the mine, written there by the hand of the dead. At another time you may tell your story—after the court of Silver Bar has heard and determined."

"You mean after my hand is as cold as the hand of your jailer," retorted the man in high boots. "No, Doctor Doubleface! The time for the truth is now, when all the ears of Silver Bar are here to listen, and when man shall judge the guilty!"

Dr. Doubleface gave Captain Poncho a dark and lowering look.

"I declare the court open for trial!" cried he.

"You do, eh?"

"I do."

"Are you the high sheriff of Silver Bar?"

"I am one who will be obeyed."

Biting his lip to the blood, Poncho fell back, white with anger.

He went to Mute Merle's side, and put his face in front of the boy's flashing eyes.

His lips moved swiftly, but he was not heard to utter a sound.

All at once Merle broke from Captain Poncho's touch.

His figure straightened proudly, and with defiance, in full view of the breathless toughs, he strode across the room, and had halted before the whitest bit of wall to be found.

His movements seemed to hold the crowd spell-bound.

Suddenly he took from his bosom a piece of thick black lead, and in another second his quick hand had dashed across the wall this one sentence, in large characters:

"Dr. Doubleface is Mesquite Marlo, the Masked Marauder, and he now holds in his power a little child, whose mother is nearly crazed with grief."

The mute stepped back from the wall, and, with a quick movement, threw up his hand, and covered the bandit doctor.

CHAPTER XIV.

DOWN INTO THE WEB.

Of course all eyes following the point of the accusing finger, centered upon the man thus singled out.

Dr. Doubleface kept his composure to a remarkable degree.

His smooth, Satanic face looked as impassive as before, though some thought they saw the shadow of a coming smile at the corners of his mouth.

The words on the wall seemed to stand out in bold relief, as if the pencil in Mute Merle's hand had emphasized them all.

"You see the tactics, gentlemen," said the doctor at length. "I am not the person on trial unless the boy and his pard constitute the Court of Silver Bar. If I am Mesquite Marlo of the plains, some stories told of me are terribly at fault. As to the child who is Captain Marlo's prisoner, you will have to ask the captain himself. I am Doctor Doubleface."

This was coolness without a blush.

Mute Merle who caught every word as it fell from the doctor's tongue went back to the wall and wrote beneath his first sentence the words:

"In the sight of God, Doctor Doublefacelies! Carmen Lanca's child is in his keeping. We are her champions, and the trail of the little one is what brought us to Silver Bar."

"A pretty tale!" answered the Lucifer pointing at the mute's last work. "Those parties are so-called bonanza kings at Cinnabar to the north. Would they quit their shafts and risk their lives on strange trails at the story of a woman whom they know nothing about beyond the fact that she owns a ranch somewhere? We must not get too far from Night Eye, men of Silver Bar. The boy's pencil and the captain's tongue must keep to the truth and justice must not lose her own."

At this Captain Poncho stepped forward. He fixed his eye upon Dr. Doubleface at whom he looked for a moment with the deepest scorn, then suddenly he turned to the crowd:

"Captain Merle has given you a world of truth in a nutshell!" exclaimed he. "What may be your opinion, men of Silver Bar, I do not know; but that does not shatter the fact that Doctor Doubleface is Mesquite Marlo. This court ought to try the judge. We are ready for the charge of murder. The man lying at the mouth of the mine went to a self-inflicted death with a lie on his lips. Night Eye could not face his master with no prisoners in the web."

"Ha, ha! that is the old turn!" laughed Dr. Doubleface. "Gentlemen, as the court is in session, I leave it all with you. If I am Mesquite Marlo I am at your service whenever wanted."

He went toward the door, the crowd making way for him, and Merle and Captain Poncho saw him disappear with the cool assurance of a level-headed desperado.

For a moment after the bandit doctor's departure an embarrassing silence fell over the crowd in the bar-room.

"We will have to open court, I reckon," said a coarse voice and the unfortunates saw the burly figure of Magog in the front line. "I have obtained Denver Dock's permission to sit in his ranch. It is larger than this room and has more air."

"And poor whisky!" growled Desert Dan over the counter, at which the crowd sent up a loud laugh.

"If you are ready as you say, come along," continued Magog, addressing Captain Poncho.

"We are ready!"

Meantime Dr. Doubleface has gone home.

He went straight to the room where he had surprised Zoe with big Magog, but the girl was no longer there.

"I am going to take no chances," exclaimed the doctor. "The Court of Silver Bar must finish the two pards, and I must give the screw another twist."

He looked into several rooms but did not find the person for whom he was looking.

Suddenly he pressed a button in the wall three times.

"She knows what that means!" he cried, watching the door with a pair of tigerish eyes. Five minutes passed, but no one came.

Dr. Doubleface got pale and red by turns.

After awhile he went back to the room where he was wont to throw the singular spell over Zoe, and unlocked a desk in one corner.

Taking from it something that had the appearance of a mask, he concealed it in his bosom and went away.

No one appeared to see the figure that slipped down the trail to the mouth of the underground web.

The bandit doctor entered the shaft and came suddenly upon the body lying there.

In a moment he was bending over Night Eye, and his hand found somewhere on the corpse a

steel key which he eyed triumphantly for a moment before putting it away.

Then he examined the writing on the stone, devouring each word with great eagerness, and running his hand over the wall as if to make sure that the accusation was really there.

In a short time he started up and went deeper into the mine.

"I see now that Captain Poncho guessed the truth, but what of it?" he said to himself. "Night Eye killed himself after the escape of his prisoners. He could not meet me after that. Zoe could tell me all about it if I could but find her. She could go into her unwilling trance and take the back trail. Night Eye does not mention the third party by name, but I know who is meant. The boy has been the pest of my life. He knows all my secrets with perhaps the possible exception of one, and Night Eye knew the secret of his life. What has become of Sierra Noll? He did not show himself at the hotel. Will he come forward as a witness for Captain Poncho and Mute Merle? If he does—by heavens! if he carries his interference to that extent, I won't withhold the blow, but he shall feel the vengeance of Doubleface and Marlo, doctor and bandit!"

He went from corridor to corridor by means of a small dark-lantern which he had brought to the place.

At length he fitted the key which he had taken from the body of Night Eye into a narrow door which stood in the wall before him. The bolt slid back without a particle of noise and the doctor entered.

At first his wandering light revealed nothing human, but in a few moments it had found a small cot at one side of the chamber, and the man of two lives soon reached it.

Asleep upon the bed, with her white hands crossed upon her little bosom, lay a child of wondrous beauty.

A wealth of dark curls half covered the pillow, and her long silken lashes equally dark added to the loveliness of her reposeful face.

Dr. Doubleface's eyes lit up with savage triumph—while he studied the sight before him, and for some time he stood there moving not as if the picture held him in his tracks by some strange spell.

"They want you, do they, my stolen pearl?" he suddenly exclaimed. "She sends them out—makes them her knight errants—to bring you back! She wants you to become queen of Ranch 29—to grow up, hating Mesquite Marlo as her father hated him. She would ransom you by giving up everything she owns in this world, but she does not know the man with whom she is dealing. She forgets that her husband hunted me—that he offered a reward for Captain Mesquite's head. I knew how to inflict a wound that would never heal. I sent an arrow of vengeance into her proud bosom when I swooped down upon the ranch with my masked eagles and robbed the nest. And but a few hours ago I shot another arrow along the track of the first. No, Carmen Lanca, you cannot rob Mesquite Marlo. He despoils; but he cannot be robbed in turn."

Having watched the sleeping child for some time, he removed the light and fell back.

"Mr. jailer is dead and I will not get another," he continued. "I will be your keeper, Carmen," he glanced toward the little girl. "I will watch you myself, and some day I will tear your mother's heart asunder by making you a faro queen or a bandit princess. But, if they should believe the pards from Cinnabar—if the mistress of Ranch 29 should come herself, I will be prepared for the emergency."

He held up his light so as to reveal a metallic looking box attached to the wall.

It was nearly two feet square and had a door in front in which there was a keyhole.

Dr. Doubleface opened the box and inspected what appeared to be a packing of sawdust.

"Death lurks in a multitude of forms where I am," he smiled, shutting the door and locking it. "Thanks to science, one can protect himself or destroy his enemies in an instant. Sleep on, Carmen. Your beautiful tiger-mother will never again fold you to her bosom and the champions whom she threw upon your trail stand now in the shadow of the mountain noose. I am master here. Mesquite Marlo is as powerful in Doctor Doubleface's home as he is at the head of his hooded hawks on the plains!"

He stole another look at the tenant of the couch, holding the light so as to fall upon her face for a moment, and then left the chamber without noise, locking the door carefully behind him.

Five minutes afterward he stood in the warm sunlight beyond the subterranean web, and

when he moved away, watched by a pair of eyes which he did not see, his handsome dark face wore a look of mingled determination and victory.

CHAPTER XV.

HALTED AND ROBBED.

DR. DOUBLEFACE knew nothing of the person who had followed him from the very door of Ranch 29.

We last saw Carmen Lanca riding away from the two bullwhackers who had given her drink at the door of their shanty.

It was from this point that Carmen turned toward Silver Bar, a camp whose location she knew pretty well by map, though she had never crossed its boundaries and had heard but little of the sort of men who inhabited it.

Love and vengeance struggling for the mastery in her bosom had urged her on through sun and shadow.

The triumphantly spoken sentences of the man who had sent her to the floor of her own parlor in a swoon filled her with fears.

She now knew that she had stood face to face with Mesquite Marlo, that she had looked into the eyes with no mask about them, and that she had again heard the voice of the man who had robbed her of her child.

This was enough to render her proof against fatigue, enough to carry her on and on with burning eagerness to meet the desert bandit in his own lair, even though she should find him surrounded by his minions.

Carmen Lanca never thought of how her mission might end. If her champions, Mute Merle and Captain Poncho, had fallen into the desperado's death-track she would find herself opposed, alone and single-handed, to the Masked Marauder and his men. And in their own domain, too!

If she had weighed the chances while galloping over the trail she would not have turned back.

The beautiful owner of Ranch 29 had at stake a life which was dearer than her own—her child's.

She had traveled nearly all the distance between her ranch and the bullwhacker's shanty over ground frequented by Mesquite Marlo and his gang.

If she was on the trail of the chief himself she was still in danger, for the Masked Eagles, as the plunderers were sometimes called, were liable to be abroad, and she might be halted and unmasked by the minions of the Hidden Face.

This thought kept Carmen on the lookout.

The stars showed her the course in which she was riding, and when they seemed to disappear from the firmament and daylight once more came, she found herself about to enter a range of foot-hills beyond which she knew lay Silver Bar.

If Dr. Doubleface was Mesquite Marlo then lost Carmen was near at hand, for his hatred of her father, though he was dead, would cause him to keep his prisoner under his own eye.

Suddenly there rose before Carmen a man on horseback. The roving eye of the trailing mother saw him before he noticed her, but in a moment she knew that she had been seen.

The long ride and the penetrating dust of the plains had changed Carmen's appearance. Her male attire fitted her figure to a nicety, and her broad-rimmed hat concealed her hair and shaded her womanish brow.

She eyed the man closely as she rode forward. He had halted directly in her path, and was looking at her with great curiosity over the sharp, fox-like ears of his horse.

Carmen saw that he had the devil-may-care air of a border free-lance, and while she rode up she carefully noted his high boots and the profusion of silver braid along the edges of his open coat.

He touched his hat to Carmen, and the next moment threw a swift look over one shoulder toward a patch of foot-hill shrubbery a few yards away.

"Mountain robbers!" thought the mistress of the ranch. "Am I to be stopped and held back by a lot of plunderers like Mesquite Marlo's band? I will not submit to it."

The solitary man kept his steed in the path with cool assurance.

"Which way?" said he to Carmen, eying her sharply, and then he proceeded before she could respond: "By Jupiter! you've come a long distance. You show it."

"Yes, and I'm not near the end of my journey," answered Carmen.

"Going through the hills, eh?"

"Perhaps."

Madam Lanca was certain by this time that

her sex had been discovered by the person before her.

He was eying the gold chain about her neck, a few links of which had slipped into view above the collar.

"Before you proceed, let me introduce you to my friends," continued the foot-hills road-agent, and the lifting of his hand drew from the bushes three men similarly mounted and attired.

"These are my companions," and the robber waved his hand at the evil-faced trio who rode forward with mischief lurking in their yellowish visages.

"What do you want?" asked Carmen.

"Oho! so you know the rest, do you?" laughed the leader. "We never mistreat those with whom we deal, though sometimes stubbornness on their part subjects them to some inconvenience. To begin, we'll take your purse."

Carmen colored and looked indignant. She was in the very midst of the quartette and she now noticed that one had quietly taken her bridle-rein and was holding it firmly.

She had not brought much ready money along, but what she had she did not want to part with. However, if a surrender of it would open the road to Silver Bar, the bandits should have it and welcome.

Madam Lanca drew forth the purse and passed it over, with a forced smile.

"You don't ask for much, only all one has," said she.

The head robber was about to reply when one of his companions leaned toward him and whispered at his ear.

"We'll take the chain, too, if you will," he resumed, nodding toward the gold links visible at Carmen's throat.

In an instant the lady of the ranch lost color.

"No! you can't have that!" cried she.

"We must. It is a bit of plunder which, if I mistake not, will enrich us to no small extent."

"It is dear to me," was the answer. "It is a keepsake, to be worn next the heart, not on account of its value—that is nothing to its owner. You can't understand why I treasure the article you want."

"Come, Madam Carmen," laughed the foot-hill Jack Sheppard. "We unmask you to tell you that we know with whom we are dealing. You are traveling in queer costume for a person of your rank and station, but that is none of our business. Our care is to line our purses, and we know the value of the diamond-cross locket that reposes on your bosom."

Madam Lanca put her hand to her throat, but not for the purpose of drawing the cross forth. She was afraid of the quick, dark hands by which she was surrounded.

"Since you know me I will not attempt to wear the mask," she replied. "I am on a mission that enlists all of the love and vengeance the human heart can hold. The cross on my bosom holds the portraits of my late husband and his child. Heaven knows in what condition and where I shall find her! As you say, there are diamonds in the cross. They are that many bits of glass to me. The portraits are the valuable property connected with the locket. Stand aside, and you may pick out the diamonds with the points of your knives. Will you do that and let me pass? Here is the cross."

At the same time Carmen's hand took the locket from its place of concealment, and unclasping it, extended it toward the band.

The bandits bent forward and feasted their eyes upon the rich cross, which glittered with diamonds from top to bottom and along the arms.

It would have excited the cupidity of any person, and the bandits of the foot-hills gazed at it with open-mouthed wonder, entirely ignoring its handsome owner in their admiration of the coveted prize.

"Take the stones and let me pass," said Carmen.

"Is your time precious?"

"It is."

"You said awhile ago that vengeance has something to do with your journey."

"So it has!" exclaimed Madam Lanca.

"Do you know what lies before you?"

"I do. It is this knowledge that takes me thither."

The four men seemed to hold a consultation with their eyes.

"The cross without the diamonds would have no beauty," remarked the leader. "The diamonds alone would not help our purses."

"I understand!" cried Carmen. "You shall have all you want."

She opened the cross, and with the point of a knife-blade which she took from her pocket, removed the two pictures set therein. These she

dropped into her bosom with a coolness that kept the eyes of the quartette upon her, and as she shut the knife, she thrust the cross forward.

"There! It will bring enough to make honest men out of you!" she exclaimed. "Take it and clear the road. One of these days I promise to redeem the plunder. I am at your mercy now. The faces of the living and the dead are going back to the cross. Remember! Carmen Lanca will recover her own!"

The cross had been accepted by the leader of the mountain bandits, and Carmen was nearly a rod away when she heard one of the four men growl:

"There's a king's ransom for her in the coffers of her ranch!"

On the instant the hand of Carmen Lanca thrust forward past her horse's ears the shining barrel of a revolver.

"I've ransomed myself already!" cried she. "The man who detains me another minute will never profit by the sale of the diamond cross!"

CHAPTER XVI.

HELD AT BAY.

CARMEN LANCA had been detained long enough by the pests of the foot-hills to prevent her from entering Silver Bar at an important moment.

If she had not been stopped, she might have come upon the scene in time to have found Dr. Doubleface with his little captive in the web, for her impetuosity would have carried her into the mine regardless of the consequences.

As it was, when she rode into the camp, she found it strangely quiet.

Dr. Doubleface was shut up in his own house, but he was not alone.

The man who watched him while he gave orders was a wiry individual, who did not lose a single syllable.

"What will be the result of the trial, Boris?" suddenly asked the doctor.

The man grinned.

"I don't think that's hard to guess," said he. "They can't get away with the evidence ag'in' 'em."

"The evidence on the wall, you mean?"

"Yes."

"The court will accept it without question, eh, Boris?"

"What else can it do?"

"Nothing else," answered the bandit doctor. "They ought to be through by this time."

"Ah! they are!" exclaimed Boris, glancing at the window. "The crowd is rushing out o' court. Magog is coming this way, walking rapidly as if he had news of importance."

Dr. Doubleface now turned his attention to the door which the big man hurrying toward the house would soon open.

In a little while a heavy step sounded in the hall, then Magog appeared.

"Well?" queried the doctor the moment he caught the giant's eye.

"The whole thing ended kind o' suddenly," replied Magog.

"The trial?"

"The trial."

Dr. Doubleface's eyes got a mad flash.

"Didn't you convict?" he exclaimed.

"I'll tell you how it was," said Magog, meeting the look with a good deal of courage.

"Give it all to me briefly, but all, mind you, Magog," cried the doctor.

"We indicted Captain High Boots and his young pard in regular order," was the response.

"The jury was there and the court was ready. In a short time we had the whole machine working in apple-pie order, and the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The evidence for the prosecution was all in—the record on the wall had been introduced and the jury had a good grip on the whole matter, when who should appear in court but Sierra Noll."

"That mountain rat?" cried Doctor Doubleface.

Magog nodded.

"What did he do?" asked the man of two lives.

"By Jove! he wasn't alone," continued Magog, with a faint smile.

"Not alone, Magog?"

"No, the girl was with him."

"Zoe?"

"Zoe."

"The deuce she was!" roared the doctor; then biting his lip to the crimson, he asked: "What happened then?"

"Sierra Noll asked that the girl be allowed to give in her testimony—not in the usual way, but by going into a trance-like sleep."

"Did the court consent?"

"It did."

"Captain Magog, why didn't you object?" cried Dr. Doubleface.

"I was not the court," replied the big man.

"The novelty of Sierra Noll's proposition carried everything before it. Zoe came forward, and we gave her a chair."

"Who assisted her? You know, Magog, that she cannot play her trance card to perfection without help. Some one must question her—"

"Some one did," broke in Magog.

"Sierra Noll bent over her when she had passed into the strange state and did that part of it."

For a moment the bandit doctor did not speak.

"Go on!" he suddenly cried. "You are not getting to the end of your narrative very fast, Magog."

"Zoe's testimony was what she saw while asleep," the big Arizonian went on. "She went back as it were and took up Night Eye's trail at a certain time and from a certain point in the mine. She followed him through the darkness to the mouth of the shaft; she told how he wrote the accusing record upon the stone and how afterward he drew his own knife and killed himself on the spot, throwing the blade away with his last gasps to be found by Sierra Noll and shown to the court while she spoke."

"Is that what turned the tide?" exclaimed Dr. Doubleface. "Did Zoe's talking in the trance beat Silver Bar and save the necks of the two invaders?"

"It caught the jury."

"And the verdict—"

"Was not guilty."

The doctor poured out a glass of wine with a hand that did not shake and emptied it with apparent relish.

"Did your court give the prisoners a title deed for Silver Bar?" he asked bitterly, fixing his gaze on Magog.

"No."

"Did it make Captain High Boots master of ceremonies, and the dumb boy cock of the walk?"

Boris grinned, but the big man made no reply.

"What did your court do?" demanded Dr. Doubleface.

"It gave the prisoners until to-morrow to go on."

The doctor broke into a loud laugh, at the end of which he took another glass of wine.

"A clever court upon my life!" said he. "Captain Magog, you will carry to it the thanks of Doctor Doubleface. Say to it in the presence of every member that this event shall have a gold medal as soon as my mines can produce one. You will recollect that Mute Merle called me with his pencil Mesquite Marlo?"

Magog bowed.

"Did the court—this celebrated court of yours, Magog—did it take any action on this matter?"

"No."

"By Jupiter! an oversight!" the bandit doctor went on in his sarcastic way. "You will reconvene the court immediately. Arrest me and put me on trial. I am Mesquite Marlo, the Masked Marauder of the plains. Mute Merle says so; you saw the writing on the bar-room wall. What! don't you think I am in earnest? Let me show you, Magog."

Dr. Doubleface left his chair and drew something from his bosom.

It was a mask of black velvet, and in a moment his hands had adjusted it, and he stood before the two men transfigured in a manner that startled them.

"What say you now, Magog?" he laughed, stripping off the mask and showing his smooth bronze face once more. "If this is not enough, I will convene the court myself. Where will I find Captain Poncho and the dumb trailer? At the Cute Catamount?"

"I can't say."

"What became of Zoe, after the trial?"

"She went off with Sierra Noll."

"To his cabin?"

"I don't know."

"Doctor," put in Boris, at this juncture, "why haven't you dealt with that young fox? More than once he's given you trouble. Last summer he liberated a man who ought to have had the rope, and a dozen times he has crossed you. Why, he has been caught sneaking into your mines at all hours like a weasel."

"I know it all, Boris," said Dr. Doubleface, with a smile. "The boy has tripped us more than once. He has been the pest of my life for

years. What would you have done with him, Boris?"

"I would have drawn the ropes!" was the answer. "A boy like that would never have pestered me long."

"Perhaps not, Boris; but we are not all alike," and the doctor dropped the subject.

"Captain Magog," he went on, in the next breath, "I'll go down with you."

"To the mine?"

"No, to the 'Catamount.' We may find the late prisoners there. I want to see how they look since they have saved their necks."

Dr. Doubleface left the two men and disappeared for a moment.

"What do you think?" asked Boris, darting forward and clutching Magog's wrist. "Is he Mesquite Marlo?"

"Mute Merle says so."

"By heavens! if I thought he was I'd drop him dead in his boots the moment he came back!"

"Why, man?"

"Mesquite Marlo buried my father alive in the desert and left the vultures to feed on his brains. If I thought, Captain Magog—"

The door opened and Boris did not finish his sentence for the doctor had come back.

Dr. Doubleface looked the very picture of coolness and accompanied by Magog and Boris left the house and walked through the warm sunlight toward Desert Dan's famous hostelry.

From the moment of his coming in sight he was closely regarded by a number of men who occupied the porch. He touched his hat to the crowd but did not speak, passing on in to the bar-room where Desert Dan was on duty.

The doctor looked once at Dan and then looked toward the wall where Merle had written the startling accusation.

It was there still, standing out as it were in big black letters which could be read from any part of the room. It told every one who saw the charge that he was Mesquite Marlo, a man whose infamous robberies and other crimes had forfeited his life wherever his name was known.

Silver Bar had no sympathy for the marauder of the plains. It had never dreamed that Dr. Doubleface was another name for the midnight plunderer. As tough as the camp was the man who caused a woman to suffer was its foe.

All at once there came between the bandit doctor and the writing on the wall the figure of Mute Merle of Cinnabar.

The Boy Nabob caught the enemy's eye and saw it flash a world of rage upon him.

"So a traitorous court let you go, eh?" exclaimed Dr. Doubleface. "What has become of your pard? If you came from the North to fight the man who stands before you the gauntlet lies at your feet. You lie on the wall counts for nothing in the game unless the fools of Silver Bar take it down. What say you now?"

Merle the mute walked to the wall, and his accusing pencil dashed his answer above the charge already there:

"We remain to fight—for justice and for Carmen Lanca!"

The next moment Dr. Doubleface went forward with a furious oath, but, at the same time, a figure which had just entered the room fell between him and the boy.

It was Magog, stalwart, bronzed and resolute!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ELECTRIC BUTTON.

THE sudden interruption of the giant of Silver Bar drew all eyes to him.

"Doctor Doubleface," said he, giving the man of two lives look for look. "The tribunal has the better right to settle between you and the boy. It has pronounced him not guilty of the death of Night Eye. It may convene again to ask you a few questions which the camp would like to have answered just now."

"When it asks I may reply," retorted the doctor. "The boy sees his accusation on the wall indorsed by the men of Silver Bar."

"Not by all of them. I have not said that I indorse the charges."

"Keep your opinions, or spit them out as you wish! When I am wanted by the tribunal, let me know."

Dr. Doubleface walked from the bar-room with his usual step.

The crowd on the porch parted as he came out and let him go through in silence, then its members fell to watching him as he passed on, not once looking back, nor abating any of his coolness.

As he left the square his ears caught the beat of hoofs and for the first time he looked over his shoulder as if he feared some one was about to ride him down.

From toward the south came a horse bearing a rather youthful looking rider, but the grime of a long trail was so thick upon him that the bandit doctor could not make him out.

"Doctor Doubleface?" called the person in the saddle and the voice caused the double rogue to halt and wait for him to come up.

The last person looked for by the marauder was in Silver Bar.

In another minute she pulled up alongside the genteel desperado and leaned toward him with a sparkle of triumph in the eyes which all of a sudden he seemed to recognize.

"Doctor Doubleface, or Mesquite Marlo—I know not which name fits you best—I want my child!"

The doctor fell back, looking at the speaker, transformed in an instant, as it were, from a strange man into Carmen Lanca of Ranch 29.

"Don't meet me with a lie," she went on, continuing to look steadily at him. "I am on the right trail. I have found Mesquite Marlo of the plains. You went a little too far in your last play. Did you think that your arrow would kill instead of putting me upon the trail? Come! where is the darling of my heart? Tamper with my love and anxiety a moment and by my life I'll kill you where you stand, and find my child afterward."

"That might be a task, madam," grinned Dr. Doubleface, provokingly nonchalant. "I am not helpless here because the court has not respected the wishes of the man who created it. Don't rush things when you may lack the best cards in the pack. You want your child, do you?"

"I do."

"How did you keep my trail?"

"Never mind. Shall I go back to the men who are watching us from the building, and tell my story in the sun?"

"No need of that!"

"My child, then?"

The man on the ground looked toward the hotel he had just left.

"Follow me, if you want your own," said he, sinking his voice almost to a whisper, and when he moved forward he had the horse at his heels.

He led Carmen to his own house, which he designated by a nod and a glance at the face above the saddle.

The lady of Ranch 29 slipped to the ground and stood beside him.

"Leave your horse here," said the doctor.

The two went in together, eagerness and resolution taking Carmen forward into what might prove a death-trap, for he whom she followed was a man of mystery and crime.

Dr. Doubleface led the way to the room where stood the table, with Zoe's trance-chair alongside.

"So you want your offspring?" queried the man of two lives, turning upon Carmen when he had shut the door.

"I have told you this before."

"She isn't here."

The words seemed to stagger the beautiful trailer.

Her face grew deathly in its hue, but a powerful effort kept her in her tracks, erect before the man whom she had found at last.

"I repeat, madam, that the child is not here," resumed the bandit doctor, as if he thought to give the mother an additional pang.

"You took her! She fell into your hands the night Mesquite Marlo and his Masked Eagles swooped down upon the ranch. You must not lie to the mother you robbed. You shall not wholly break the heart of Carmen Lanca, and live to boast of the deed."

She came toward him with her hand at her side, and a glance downward showed Doctor Doubleface the glitter of a knife-blade along her sleeve.

He did not recoil from her, but merely threw up one hand and placed a finger on a button which was visible on the wall.

Carmen's quick eye caught the movement.

"Woman, the trail of the lost is irrecoverable," he exclaimed. "The child of the man who set a price upon Mesquite Marlo's head cannot return to Ranch 29 with her mother. You hold along your sleeve a knife ready for the heart you have hunted by proxy and in person. Your two champions, favored by fortune, cannot recover the trail they have lost. My finger touches the button of a powerful battery, whose wires run underground to a certain chamber, against the wall of which is fastened a metallic box, containing enough of a new explosive to wreck everything for rods

around. A man who plays a double game generally prepares for an emergency. His hours of supposed idleness are hours of the deepest study—the busiest ones of his life.

"I am Mesquite Marlo, the captain of the Masked Eagles of the plains. I am also Doctor Doubleface, the master of Silver Bar. In a short time, the camp where I have ruled, with a rod of iron under the velvet, will be in open revolt.

"The band of the dumb Croesus from the North has made a charge which is believed by more than one-half of the toughs of the camp. Magog believes that I am Mesquite Marlo, Sierra Noll has known the secret for years, and Zoe can be made to follow me in her trances upon more than one ranch raid. I can fight all my foes, and fight them successfully. My strange experiments, my far-reaching wires laid at night, and charged with the deadly fluid, render me all-powerful with the deck apparently stacked against me.

"Look! my finger moves the button," and Dr. Doubleface pressed the shining object in, while Carmen for an instant fell back with a shudder. "The blow will not be felt here," he went on smiling at the effect of his words. "When I bestow a sudden pressure upon the button an electric current will flash along the hidden wires, it will find the metallic box on the wall, and then—then, Madam Lanca, find your child if you can!"

"In God's name what do you mean!" cried the mistress of the ranch.

"Where are your thoughts?" laughed the cool bandit. "Have I spoken in riddles, woman?"

Her white face told that he had not.

"But you would not do it?" exclaimed Carmen. "You cannot carry the hatred of her father to the child herself."

"I can do anything!" was the answer. "Look at the electric button and say that Mesquite Marlo is not as powerful at home as he is abroad. You would send your champions after me, madam. Not content with them you come yourself—tracking me through dust and dew with the pertinacity of a bloodhound. Will you go back?"

"Without my child?" cried the woman. "No, I cannot do that!"

"That is your answer? Remember, that the pressing of the button renders you childless."

A wild, strange thought seemed to take possession of the mother's brain.

She measured the distance between her and the man who confronted her, weighed the chances for success in a quick leap at the hand against the wall.

"Madam, the hand of Mesquite Marlo is quicker than your eye," warned the outlaw doctor, as if he had read her very thoughts. "Before you could throw yourself across the space that separates us, the cage and its little bird would be atoms! What is the decision? Be quick!"

For a moment Madam Lanca eyed the human tiger, and looked in vain for a gleam of mercy in his cruel eyes.

"I cannot—will not go back without my child!" she exclaimed. "Better carry her home dead than ride away, the coward mother of Arizona! If you touch the button, Mesquite Marlo, I will kill you, anyhow, and drag you at my horse's heels back to the home you robbed!"

She took an impulsive step forward, with the knife thrown suddenly above her head; she seemed about to dash straight at the breast of the cool villain at the wall.

All at once a sharp click sounded in the room, for the button, pressed suddenly by the bandit doctor, had sunk out of sight!

"Madam, you have murdered the child of your bosom!" said he with a cool smile. "The hunt for little Carmen has ended. She has been blown into darkness in the bowels of the earth!"

The last word had hardly been spoken, when the Arizona mother cleared the space that separated them, but, quick as she was, the hands of Dr. Doubleface caught her, and held her at arm's length, while he laughed his triumph!

CHAPTER XVIII.

RESTORED.

"THE tigress sometimes meets her match!" exclaimed the bandit doctor looking into the face of the woman whom he held at his mercy. "You have come a long distance to fail, madam. You forgot that Mesquite Marlo can win without his Masked Eagles. Hah! do you want your child now?"

There was no reply.

Realizing, as it were, in all its terrible meaning, the pressing of the button in the wall, Carmen Lanca felt a faintness stealing over her.

Her mission had failed. Not only this, but her coming had sealed the doom of her darling, for Dr. Doubleface had exploded the box on the wall of the little one's prison!

The outlaw saw the shadows of the swoon which was about to place the mistress of the ranch more completely at his mercy, and when, with a gasp and a shudder, Carmen passed into the unconscious state, a triumphant smile settled over his face.

Depositing her upon a sofa he turned to the button and pressed it again.

Instead of coming back after sending the deadly current over the buried wires it had remained imbedded in the wall!

"It should rebound after pressure!" said the doctor. "It never fails."

He pressed it again and again, but, with the same result; the button would not spring back to its place.

"I heard no noise and felt no shaking," thought he. "There should have been a trembling of the earth beneath the house. Can it be that the wires have been tampered with?"

Yes, Dr. Doubleface, the unseen wires have been found and the hands cordially hated by you have saved from an awful death the beautiful prize of the game.

Let us see.

A few minutes after the outlaw's departure from the Cute Catamount, Mute Merle left the place, going direct to a certain cabin in the cluster of buildings that composed the camp.

"What detained you?" asked Noll, as the boy entered.

As Captain Poncho was also there, with a young girl who looked at Merle with eyes beaming with happiness, he replied with his swift fingers, the silent language of which the captain translated for the doctor's pest.

"So the tables have been turned!" smiled Noll. "There are still several cards in Doctor Doubleface's hand, but he cannot win with them. Silver Bar believes the charges and is turning against its master. There are men here who have stood ready for years to kill Mesquite Marlo on sight, and the wonder is that the doctor has been able to guard his secret so well. Even Zoe here—the fly always in the web—did not suspect, though long ago I discovered the connection between the two. How? I cannot tell the story now, for we have other work on hand. We are going to invade the web of darkness. Zoe has just come out of the most remarkable trance she has ever experienced. She has found the little captive—Carmen Lanca. I drew a diagram of a part of the mine at her dictation and the captain and I think we can find the trail."

The three set out, leaving Zoe in the cabin. The girl was weak from her exhaustive trance, and wanted rest, saying that when the game was over—the lost found and the guilty punished—she would never tempt the dangers of the spell again.

"Mesquite Marlo is a man of genius," said Noll, halting at a certain spot in one of the underground corridors and throwing the light of his torch above his head. "He and Night Eye have run electric wires underground between his house and the mine. These wires communicate with explosives which can be set off by electricity. I have watched the two workmen, night after night, when discovery meant death. Here are the wires. You can touch them now without any danger of being hurled into eternity."

"How so?" queried Captain Poncho.

"They have been cut; the deadly current is broken," smiled Noll. "The last time I came down here, alone, I sought them out and severed them with a hatchet. I think I did not miss one. It was too risky to dwell over a death-mine like the one Doctor Doubleface controlled. I cut the wires for the future as well as for the present. He can now touch the electric button as often as he pleases. It is as harmless as the wires that hang from the walls in the dark."

Ten minutes afterward the three rescuers found a small portal set into a wall. Noll held his torch close to it a moment and then pointed at it while he looked into the faces of his companions.

"Here is where Zoe stopped in her trance. I am sure of it," said he.

The door seemed to offer the most stubborn resistance, but the party, remembering Captain Poncho's successful attack upon the wall of his prison, had come prepared, and heavy blows were quickly falling upon the right spot.

In short, the door was battered from its hinges, and when Merle and Sierra Noll had pulled it out the trio rushed forward, the torch throwing its light into the corners of the chambers just discovered.

When the child-hunters halted in the center of the room, a singular noise was heard in one corner, and in a moment Sierra Noll was holding the torch over the frightened face of a little girl—the lost pearl of Ranch 29!

"Carmen Lanca!" exclaimed all three in a breath, and the Boy Nabob of Cinnabar took the child up and kissed her.

"This," said Captain Poncho, "compensates for all the dangers we have risked. At any time I would go through fire for an angel of this sort, to say nothing of bearding Mesquite Marlo, or Doctor Doubleface in his lair."

"Yes, Captain High Boots," answered Sierra Noll, "the rescue of the child seals the doom of the man of the two lives. She is the living proof that he is the Masked Marander of the plains. Let us go back."

With Carmen in Captain Poncho's arms, the party turned from the underground prison and started toward the upper air.

They did not see the figure which, hugging the wall of one of the passages, watched their torch with the eyes of a demon.

The dark hands of this person clutched a repeating-rifle, which every now and then he would raise to his shoulder, only to lower it again like a hunter undecided.

It was dark where he stood, but if the torch could have discovered him he would have stood revealed as Doctor Doubleface.

He had just entered the web.

Leaving Carmen Lanca in a swoon at his house, he had come to see why his attempt to destroy the child had failed, and he had just found out.

The severed wires told him that some hand had frustrated his diabolical plans.

"The hand that carries the torch is the one that baffled me!" grated the bandit doctor, watching the torch as it moved along a path some distance below him and well in view. "That boy has been my pest ever since ill-fortune threw him across my path. But for the blood in his veins I would now take vengeance for his work. I could send him unsummoned into the presence of his Maker, but I will not. The mute foil, though, I will settle with. His pencil talks with an emphasis which must cost him his life. He and his companion have taken up the woman's cause for the purpose of destroying the power of Mesquite Marlo and Doctor Doubleface. They have succeeded—curses on their heads! Zoe is out of my power forever. She uses her marvelous gift for my destruction. She will become the bride of the boy who has watched me only to discover my secrets, one by one, and to render useless in the end the mission of the button in the wall!"

This time Dr. Doubleface lifted the Winchester with more deliberateness than before.

The light of the torch below fell full upon the figure of Mute Merle, the Boy Nabob.

"I can get both of you," muttered the bandit. "I will do it, thus giving the toughs of Cinnabar two ownerless mines to fight over."

His finger was at the trigger, and his eye, glancing over the barrel, saw for the time only the handsome youth walking behind Sierra Noll, when a pair of arms encircled his neck and he was thrown against the wall with a force that threatened to break every bone in his body.

The weapon, thrown off by this movement, sent its bullet downward, clipping a lock of Captain Poncho's hair and depositing it upon Carmen's cheek!

Dr. Doubleface gave utterance to a mad exclamation and struggled until he found himself in a grip stronger than his own.

"In Satan's name, who are you?" asked the bandit.

"Magog!" was the response.

There came a day in the history of Silver Bar when its mysterious doctor was a memory of the past. This day was not long delayed, for the Arizonian court was convened soon after the events just recorded, and the midnight crimes of the plains as well as the evil deeds of Dr. Doubleface were avenged at one and the same time.

The party which rode out of Silver Bar after the avenging consisted of four persons, and two of these, Captain Poncho and Mute Merle, gazed with pride upon the woman who was continually smothering in kisses a child whom she held in her arms.

Sierra Noll and Zoe remained behind, for a will, which Dr. Doubleface drew up a short time before his execution, gave all his immense property to his young enemy, which established the belief that Sierra Noll was the bandit's own son.

Believing this, himself, Noll restored all he could to those who had been plundered by Mesquite Marlo and his Eagles, and then had plenty left for Zoe and himself.

Mute Merle and Captain Poncho returned to Cinnabar with the thanks of Carmen Lanca—they would take nothing else for their services—and, not long ago, the handsome widow became the wife of the man sometimes called Captain High Boots.

In time she took another trail, and hunted down the men who had despoiled her of the diamond cross.

THE END.

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